The Art of Distances
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Chapter 6  

Günter Grass’s Century

In contrast to Ernaux’s commitment to a photographic writing that would provide, in realistic vein, glimpses into the lives of other people, Grass’s project reclaims the privilege of the writer, indeed, his inalienable right, to imagine the lives of others by lending his (autobiographical) “I” to a plurality of fictional narrators: “I, trading places with myself, was in the thick of things, year in and year out.”1 Thus begins his imaginative chronicle, modifying with the very first sentence the autobiographical pact, which stipulates, following Lejeune’s definition, the author’s identity with the narrator and the narrated self.

How do we read Arendt’s premonition that Benjamin stood on the threshold of the Last Judgment, from the perspective offered by Günter Grass in 1999, when he published his chronicle of the twentieth century, Mein Jahrhundert? Interspersing the objective and the subjective, the everyday and the momentous, Grass’s idiosyncratic chronicle offers a strange, and appropriately twentieth-century response to Walter Benjamin’s farewell to the nineteenth century. If Benjamin’s Berlin Chronicle was a long farewell to the “mausoleum designed especially for [him],” to his parents’ Berlin house, and to the nineteenth century to which he felt he belonged, Grass’s narratives read like so many frescoes on a monument to the twentieth century. The title of the book refers both to the century in which Grass was born and to his own version of it.2 But whether he felt “at home” or not, is not a question one can answer; perhaps one that the text invites reformulating: was it possible to feel at home in the twentieth century? Striking, in this tome, is the relinquishing of the purely autobiographical in favor of an inclusion of voices of various people, all contributing perspectives on this question. As in Wim Wenders’s Der Himmel über Berlin, where, with Benjaminian nostalgia, everyday details and historical events are blown out of the flow of time and given symbolic significance (the Olympic Games, a lovers’ embrace, an old man reading the Odyssey to an unblinking child on a hill appear as equally revealing), in Grass’s tome history is evoked from below, in a leveling out of events and objects, an interweaving of history and stories. I read Grass’s text as a response both to the Arcades—Benjamin’s quotes from famous writers
are in Grass replaced by short narratives of fictional everyday lives of the more or less obscure—and to Berlin Childhood: while Benjamin’s is a personal portrait, the city functioning as a broadening of the familiar space of the house, which is an extension of the child’s own body, around 1900 (as evoked from the alienating perspective of exile), Grass’s is the (hi)story/(auto) biography of the century written from the perspective of 1999: there is no “home,” but rather an acknowledgment of the lives of other people; not an everyday in its inchoate form as in Benjamin, but an everyday projected onto the larger perspective of the century.3

Like Ernaux, who claims that there is no hierarchy in our experiences of the world, and that the most trivial occurrences contain a human truth, Grass seems to level down the significance of major historical events that have marked the past century by providing one hundred stories of equal length corresponding to each year from 1900 to 1999. He thus seems to give equal attention to various aspects of everyday life: wearing a straw hat or the use of zeppelins appear to be as important as the popularity of record players or the prospect of cloning; November 9, 1938 (Kristallnacht), as crucial to remember as November 9, 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall); the meetings between Heidegger and Celan in the late 1940s as memorable as the love parades of the 1990s. In thirteen of the vignettes, Grass briefly reminisces over his own past, in a meditation on the coincidence between his birth-year and the publication of Heidegger’s Sein und Zeit, for instance, or on various episodes of his life as a politically invested citizen or as a public intellectual. But his own existence appears as one among many, they are all interconnected and part of the texture of history, woven, from the beginning to the end, in the first person. As a chronicle grafted onto an autobiography—or is it the other way?—My Century courts an interesting paradox: on the one hand, by constantly shifting perspective in an accumulation of voices that are meant to give a variety of inflections to the tenor of the century, it suggests that history is a collective experience and that no one life story could possibly provide a full picture of it.4 On the other hand, it attaches importance to each individual story, taking seriously its exemplary value, the singularity of its historicity.

My interest in Grass’s tome will here be limited to questions that relate directly to the displacement of the autobiographical self through attention to other lives, real or imagined. My Century is, as many critics have remarked, a very German book, and as such it does not serve my philosophical argument about the intimation of a nonexclusionary notion of community that distances itself from a “project” or from a commonality (Germanness, for instance). What Grass’s book does contribute to our discussion, however, through its expansion of the temporal framework to the whole century and the inclusion of so many (characters’) lives is an interesting problematization of the very idea of representation and exemplarity that add perspective to the transformation of the autobiographical, completing Ernaux’s. My aim is to show how his “project of attention” to the lives of others—I am reusing a
formulation with which Sheringham characterizes Ernaux’s diary—situates Grass in proximity of German historians of the everyday (a group around Alf Lüdtke), but also within the more recent framework of “memory contests” after reunification, a cultural paradigm that acknowledges the plurality of views on the legacy of the past. A brief review of the literature will provide a departure point for these elaborations, grounding them in the critiques that have been brought to Grass’s tome. The criticisms leveled at My Century are important as symptomatic of the tensions with which the very notion of representation is fraught; as Grass himself put it in a speech in 1994, in the postmodern media age, “the newly published book is not itself the event: the response to it is.”

The book was published in July 1999, a little less than three months before the Stockholm Nobel Prize Committee announced that Grass, a candidate in waiting since the publication of Die Blechtrommel (The Tin Drum, 1959), was to receive the award. Compared to other books by him, My Century received much less, and more ambivalent, attention; and after the award, it was mentioned in passing, overshadowed by more prominent works like The Tin Drum, the other two novels in the Danzig Trilogy, Cat and Mouse and Dog Years, Diary of a Snail, all the way to Too Far Afield and later Crabwalk, not to mention Peeling the Onion (2006) which caused a heated controversy with implications that transcended the public persona of Günter Grass, and that bore on the legacy of National Socialism and the question of German national identity, the autonomy of the institution of literature and of literary prizes including the Nobel. Evaluated against Grass’s own previous writing, My Century appeared as an oddity and hardly any aspect of it was consensually praised. In The Literary Quartet (Das literarische Quartet), the ZDF show that made the critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki a household name in Germany, he expressed reservations—in agreement with the other participants in the discussion—about the structural device of the book of devoting one story to each year of the twentieth century, which he found flawed. Although many critics did appreciate the diversity of the stories and topics, some bemoaned the “Grass sound” which allegedly permeated them: while Ingo Arend, for instance, praised Grass’s strategy of making the century come alive in a mosaic displaying the sophistication of a colored Neuruppin broadsheet, especially in the (exclusively German) view from below; and Helmut Böttinger appreciated Grass’s research, use of folklore and, occasionally, dialect, which gave an air of authenticity to his stories; Bruno Preisendörfer characterized Mein Jahrhundert as a notable work of contemporary literature, but estimated that the first-person narratives sounded too much like Grass and lacked variety, and Fritz Raddatz praised the pastiche feature of the stories, but also critiqued the author’s voice, which to his ears sounded like a dogmatic Cassandra. Others found problematic precisely the diversity of topics, on grounds that they remain obscurely German—that is, unintelligible to readers who are not deeply familiar with German history and social life from
the earliest days of the century to its end. Other critics had mixed feelings about the claims they thought were implicit in the title of the work: Ulrich Greiner claimed that Grass had already written a compelling book about the twentieth century, and that had been *Die Blechtrommel*; Volker Hage thought the title was rather presumptuous, since the author is present in only thirteen of the one hundred chapters, and because the selection of episodes featuring historical events was rather arbitrary; moreover, some critics bemoaned the lack of a more explicit rapport between human actions, social relations, and the forces of history.\textsuperscript{9} Iring Fetscher defended the book against critics who claimed that the perspective of the little people predominated to the detriment of other viewpoints, citing the entry for 1994, featuring the unnamed Birgit Breuel, identifiable as the chief of the *Treuhand*, and the 1960s meeting between Erich Maria Remarque, author of the well-known antiwar novel *Im Western nichts Neues* (All Quiet on the Western Front, 1929) and Ernst Jünger, whose *Im Stahlgewittern* (Storm of Steel, 1929) was criticized as a glorification of war.\textsuperscript{10} However, Fetscher is not always in agreement with Grass’s choice of consequential episodes or moments: for instance, instead of the fictional encounter that Grass stages between Gottfried Benn and Bertolt Brecht in the year of their deaths (1956), Fetscher would have found more compelling the evocation of Soviet leader’s Nikita Khrushchev’s secret speech about Stalin’s crimes, which marked the beginning of de-Stalinization and thus had epochal significance. In the same critical vein, hinting with the interrogative title “My Century?” at the idiosyncratic choice of events in Grass’s tome, Wolfgang Weber enumerates the significant moments in the history of the past century that Grass did not recall, such as the October 1917 revolution in Russia, the November 1918 revolution in Germany, the 1929 collapse of the world economy, and so on.\textsuperscript{11}

On the other side of the Atlantic—the English translation was available only after the Nobel Prize was announced, which gave a more celebratory tone to the reviews, although many were reticent—critics also raised the question whether the text is “inclusive and shared enough, whether *My Century* is bigger, more truly universal, than the sum of its parts.”\textsuperscript{12} Additionally, cultural historian Peter Gay and Richard Bernstein agreed that the book does not form a coherent whole: it is a “collection of fragments that fail to cohere” (Gay), and although it exhibits “flashes of brilliance,” and is in part “gripping and uniformly intelligent,” it consists of “mostly forgettable fragments” that do not offer a “coherent, gripping or illuminating whole” (Bernstein).\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, writer and academic Ian Buruma critiqued the book’s political undertones, coinciding with Grass’s well-known political positions, for instance in the ambivalent or negative way it portrays the nationalist aspirations of the GDR population. As is well known, Grass was critical of the project of reunification—he repeatedly invoked the disastrous consequences of former dreams of national greatness during Germany’s Nazi past, and claimed that after two dictatorships, East Germany had no experience of democracy—which,
according to Buruma, “represents a colossal failure of imagination . . . [in one of] the most celebrated writers of the twentieth century.”

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to address all these critiques, many will be put in perspective by considering My Century in the broad framework of an analysis of the representation of the everyday, the sphere of experience shared with other people. To begin with, Bernstein’s characterization of the book as providing “unsatisfactorily fragmentary glances at people and events that disappear almost as soon as they are seen” finds an apt rebuttal in Ernaux’s description of her project, to transcribe “scenes, words, gestures of anonymous people that one will never see again, graffiti on walls, no sooner scribbled than erased” (JD, 8) and by this token places Grass in the position of a retrospective chronicler of everyday life. There are several immediate consequences that ensue from this: the stories cannot form a coherent whole, because the everyday is notoriously a space of heterogeneity; furthermore, by staging stories of a great variety of characters, often around a conflictual situation triggered by a historical event, Grass challenged the view of a unified German history, striking a note that has become more familiar in Germany in recent years in the numerous “memory contests” occasioned by various public events (not least by the publication of Peeling the Onion). The charge that the one hundred stories are permeated by the same, recognizable Grassian sound loses its force in confrontation with the opposite view, of critics who praise the diversity of topics and genres, including monologues, dialogues, letters, short stories, reminiscences, and confessions. Grass’s novels have typically been praised for the complexity of his characters, presented in their “flaws and dross”; do shorter sketches, necessarily less thick portrayals, become excessively “Grassian” through accumulation? This question also touches on the question of how “representative” Mein Jahrhundert is or can be, since it necessarily bears Grass’s signature: is it inclusive enough? Is not the title arrogant, as one critic said, with its implicit claim that its author, even someone of Grass’s stature, could represent everyone who lived in the twentieth century? “Should the emphasis be placed on ‘my’ or on ‘century’?” Decidedly, on both: My Century plays on the double register of autobiography and chronicle, reclaiming the writer’s right to artistic idiosyncrasy, be it expressed in the form of imaginative forays into the fraught territories of history. To illustrate this point, let us consider some of the criticisms that challenge the notion of representation (of events and people) in Grass’s account of the twentieth century.

Thirteen of the hundred episodes in My Century feature Grass himself, covering each decade of his life (with the exception of the 1940s, a silence filled in 2006 with the publication of Peeling the Onion). The image of Grass that emerges is less of the private individual than of the involved citizen and intellectual. However, one can hardly confine the “autobiographical” to the concrete entries evoking events of his life; the very choice of events that he recalled and the kinds of narrators he delegated for this task, the stylistic
features of the vignettes, the political views that Grass otherwise expressed and defended in the public arena—all make My Century the book that it is. Although Grass’s project is to “represent” the century in which he lived (the historical twentieth century), he is a historical individual and the choices he made can only be subjective—“his” century (i.e., the representation thereof) cannot possibly coincide entirely with someone else’s, therefore critiques that highlight events Grass “did not recall,” or claim that in a particular year, a different moment proved to have epochal consequences, are indicative of their authors’ preferences or agendas (rather than of Grass’s failures or omissions), and suggest what their “century” would have looked like, had they chosen to undertake a version of the project conceived by Grass. Or is the implication that out there, there is an “objective” chronicle of the century, and that in each given year, there is one event that detaches itself with absolute clarity, as the most significant, both in that particular context and in retrospect? Who is part of the tribunal that determines such a hierarchy of events? Even if we were to grant the possibility of such an objective view, what notion of literature is implied in the critique that a text does not align itself with that objectivity? And how to respond to the charge that Grass’s text might not be inclusive, or representative enough? Since Grass called his book My Century—not Our Century—his writer’s imaginative testimony should be a compelling enough account, no more, but also no less than an example, of what it was like to live (and imagine living) in the past century. Two examples will serve to show that to determine what counts as “representative” in this tome is not an easy task, since Grass’s century does not progress in straightforward fashion, or at a uniform pace, toward its own completion (or exhaustion), despite the appearance of stories equal in length corresponding to each chronological year. “Representation,” in Grass’s writing, typically works by way of indirection, irony and allusion, as readers of his previous novels are well aware; it is negotiated, in other words, in unquantifiable variables. And there is often, in these modes of indirection, more than what is explicitly said.

Let us consider, for instance, Iring Fletcher’s point that in some cases Grass might have chosen events whose impact was more lasting than the ones that do appear in My Century. To the fictional encounter that Grass stages between Gottfried Benn and Bertolt Brecht in the year of their deaths (1956), for example, Fletcher would have preferred the evocation of Nikita Khrushchev’s secret speech about Stalin’s crimes, which marked the beginning of de-Stalinization. I would contend that Grass’s 1956 story is arguably richer in suggestions and subtler than a direct engagement with Khrushchev’s secret speech might have been. First of all, Grass’s century is German, so a story featuring this speech, delivered confidentially to the Twentieth Party Congress on February 25, 1956, would not have been coherent with his project. In the imaginary meeting between Benn and Brecht, however, there is an explicit mention of Stalin and a cautious intimation of a new era. One might go as
far as to argue that Grass might have had this particular speech in mind, and that his story is a response—a writer’s response, and featuring writers—to it. The beginning of Khrushchev’s speech should suffice to illustrate this point:

We have to consider seriously and analyze correctly [the crimes of the Stalin era] in order that we may preclude any possibility of a repetition in any form whatever of what took place during the life of Stalin, who absolutely did not tolerate collegiality in leadership and in work, and who practiced brutal violence, not only toward everything which opposed him, but also toward that which seemed to his capricious and despotic character, contrary to his concepts.16

The imaginary meeting between Benn and Brecht foregrounds the spontaneous collegiality between two writers who delight in quoting from memory from each other’s work. With this imagined encounter, Grass makes a strong case for the community in spirit that art creates, and, with the specific choice of two politically involved authors, for art’s forceful ways of articulating the ills of Western civilization: “Nothing in their wanderings or at least in the bits and pieces I put together betrayed any sense of enmity. Each quoted from the other’s works rather than from his own and took pleasure in the ambiguity of the selection process” (MC, 144). Stalin is mentioned in passing when Benn quotes mockingly from Brecht’s poem:

Their own political sins they dealt with rather cursorily: one gave a mocking reading from a hymn to the party written by the other (“. . . the great reaper-leader of the Soviet land, / Joseph Stalin, / Spoke of millet, spoke of dung and arid wind . . .”), whereupon the latter pointed out the connection between the former’s onetime enthusiasm for the Nazi propaganda organ *Dorische Welt* and a speech he once gave in honor of the Fascist Futurist Marinetti. (MC, 145)

In these exchanges Grass foregrounds not only the misguided political allegiances that these writers subsequently distanced themselves from, but also the sympathy, even complicity, with which each of them points to the other’s “political sins.” Is this Grass’s own reclamation of the right to be occasionally wrong, his plea for distance? Brecht’s testament-poem “An die Nachgeborenen” (“The Coming Generation / To Those Born Later”), quoted by Benn, seems to point in this direction, especially under the auspices of Kleist, by whose grave Grass imagines their meeting:

“Ihr, die ihr auftauchen werdet aus der Flut
In der wir untergegangen sind
Gedenkt
Wenn ihr von unseren Schwächen sprecht
Auch der finsteren Zeit
Der ihr entronnen seid.” (MJ, 202)

Then again one praised the other’s *The Measures Taken* ironically as “the verbal universe of a true Ptolemean” only to exonerate both sinners gathered at Kleist’s grave with a quote from the great poem *To Those Born Later*:

“You who shall emerge from the flood
We have drowned in
Recall
When you think on our frailties
The dark times
You have escaped.” (MC, 145, translation modified)

It is, of course, a matter open to the reader’s interpretation what *Kleistgrab*, Kleist’s grave, stands for here: I would surmise that Brecht’s address to posterity might harbor echoes of Kleist’s ironic rebuff of all theories of human perfection. Grass sets up a fascinating game here: the picture of man torn apart by conflicting forces, of a split created by consciousness that renders humans neither animals nor gods, emerges from a dialogue that Kleist staged between two interlocutors who often speak rather ironically, entitled “On the Marionette Theater.” Without going into the elaborate (and often slippery) details of Kleist’s simulated dialogue, the idea that might be relevant here, central to their discussion, is that marionettes have a natural, single-minded grace that cannot be equaled by humans who are weighed down by self-consciousness and doubts, the result of their having eaten from the tree of knowledge. Kleist’s dialogue has been interpreted as an ironic play on the ideals of classicism and romanticism, but in this context it sets the stage, with its allusion to the Fall of Man, for the Flood—which Brecht’s poem references—that human failures caused later. “You who shall emerge from the flood / We have drowned in.” Brecht and Benn are the two interlocutors in the dialogue staged by Grass, but also his puppets (in the sense reminiscent from Kleist’s dialogue): they mimic single-mindedly and thus with grace an ideal of communication that contradicts the narrator’s expectation of enmity, while also providing, by way of Brecht’s art, the perfect plea for leniency on the part of the coming generations. In the opening paragraph of this 1956 entry, the narrator, who is a student of literature and aspiring poet, hints at Grass’s own reasons for embedding the quiet nod at a new epoch:
In March of that morbid-mournful year, when one died in July, shortly after his seventieth birthday, and the other, not yet sixty, died in August, when the world I had known seemed a wasteland to me, the stage a void, I, a student of German literature making his own first attempts at poetry in the shadow of two giants, encountered them both in Berlin at the grave of Heinrich von Kleist, a remote spot with a view of the Wannsee, the site of many an uncommon encounter both fortuitous and contrived. . . . At times they stood so close they might have been on a single pediment, but they also moved apart, concerned to maintain the presumed gap between them. (MC, 143)

Closeness and distance: Grass, weary of ideologies, whether Left or Right, also suspicious of promises, however discreet, of grand political changes, finds his own way of negotiating the rapprochement between the East and the West, in this encounter between two influential literary figures, “the one famed in the western sector of the city as literary—and consequently uncrowned—king, the other the readily quotable authority of the eastern sector” (MC, 143–144). Benn’s ironic jab at Brecht’s poem featuring Stalin is perhaps also Grass’s way of gesturing toward the writers’ much earlier realization—albeit after a period of misguided enthusiasm, but preceding by decades the beginning of de-Stalinization initiated by Khrushchev—of what Stalinism meant. Yet, to deflate the far-reaching symbolic implications of this imagined meeting, denying its oblique relevance to the year’s epochal event (Khrushchev’s speech) and giving a reason for his pessimism, Grass/the narrator concludes: “Nothing about the political situation. Not a word about rearmament in East or West. And still quipping over the quick and the dead, they left the grave of the immortal Kleist without ever having quoted or so much as mentioned him” (MC, 146, my italics). The bitter irony of the last sentence cannot be missed: towering over Kleist’s work is an ideal of perfection achievable in art, and the belief that life was bearable only if approached with a life-plan.18 The narrator of Grass’s story alludes to the “wasteland” that the world seemed to him, and to the frustrated hope of gaining some insight into the present from the conversation between his literary idols: “The ‘you’ [in Brecht’s poem] I took to refer to me, a member of the ‘coming generation’ currently listening in on them in the shadows. I had to be content with this admonition: I had expected my idols to give me more insight into their pioneering errors, but none was forthcoming” (MC, 145). The story concludes with his decision to give up literature and to turn to mechanical engineering, which adds yet another critical layer to the grim Zeitdiagnose that this story adumbrates so deftly.

The second example of a critical stance toward the issue of representation in *My Century*—this time also capturing the political sense of representing various groups suggested by the German word *Vertretung*—bears on Grass’s
attention to the lives of women. In the essay “‘Gezz will ich ma erzählen’ Narrative and History in Günter Grass’s Mein Jahrhundert,” Monika Shafi asserts that Grass undertook in his 1999 tome a “monumental task”: “entering the stories and memories of nameless citizens into Germany’s historical records can . . . not only save some of them from oblivion but also mobilize resistance and critical knowledge.” Responding to reviewers who dismissed the book as “neither (literary) fish nor (historic) fowl,” she commends precisely Grass’s refusal to confine his text to one genre: “Grass turns his attention from the bios of the self to the bios of the collective, requiring him to perform multiple balancing acts between fact and fiction, literature and history, autobiography and biography.”

Grass’s account however falls short of this promising agenda, she notes, because women are underrepresented and no foreigner gets unmediated hearing. Some twenty episodes, Shafi grants, are narrated by women, while others are mediated by female figures, and some do tackle critically xenophobia in Germany. Furthermore, women in My Century “often comment critically on ideologies and corruption or advocate on behalf of their husbands,” and “one could argue that Grass pictured how the majority of women lived in the first half of the century.” But, she continues, “without taking into account women’s views and without a critique of this situation, such depictions reveal an unabashedly male perspective.” In other words, Grass did try to offer a sympathetic representation of women’s lives, but his perspective is not feminist. What would that mean?

Even when such issues as the campaign for abortion rights (“1971”) or the students’ movement (“1966,” “1967,” “1968”) are discussed, in which gender played a pivotal role, women either perceive them as purely personal—her best friend suffering the consequences of a butchered abortion—or as party politics. Suffrage, access to institutions of higher learning, the West German women’s movement of the seventies, East and West German women’s struggle to balance career and family—none of this concerns Grass’s female or male protagonists.

While these issues are no quibbles, and certainly not negligible landmarks in the history of women’s liberation movement, Shafi’s critique suggests how a feminist would have presented the twentieth century, the problem being that Grass, whose agenda Shafi characterizes as empowering the “little people” (i.e., the individuals whose lives and rights are not acknowledged by the dominant narratives) is not sufficiently sensitive to the perspective of a feminist historian. Even when he does portray women allowing them to speak in their own voice—that is, in episodes narrated by women—Shafi expresses reservations with respect to how the “message” is skewed by the setting in which these women are represented. To illustrate this point, it seems worth
quoting in full her analysis of the episode corresponding to the year 1980. This is a particularly significant story because it actually portrays a woman from the perspective of a male narrator:

A young woman, a housewife and mother of three young children, organizes a highly successful support of the so-called “boat people,” refugees in the Southern Seas in China. The woman and her friends jeopardize the official German politics of non-involvement, prompting a visit by a high-ranking member of the German Foreign Service. This “Leiter des Zuständigen Referats” (298) is the story’s narrator, informing his supervisor that the woman laughs at his references to the maritime law of 1910 while cooking stew and tending young children. Not surprisingly, the entire encounter takes place in the woman’s kitchen, where the visitor sits uncomfortably on the laundry basket and is even asked to stir the stew. Ironically undermining the narrator’s arguments (who in his heart sides with his opponent), “1980” supports the woman’s point of view, applauding not only her political causes but also the easy manner in which she handles such diverse agendas as international politics and mundane domestic responsibilities. “‘Mit links’ mache sie das” (298), declares the protagonist, truly a superwoman, who is not only having it all but also doing it all. This story’s numerous juxtapositions, grassroots activism versus governmental restraint, humanitarian support versus bureaucratic indifference, housewife/mother versus male diplomat, and official discourse versus common-sense talk, all center on the gendered opposition between the private and the public realm. Although the female figure represents an alternative to traditional politics and gender norms, her political empowerment is at the same time so overlaid with the conventions of female domesticity, empathy, and caring that it confirms rather than challenges the rules it purports to upset. Infusing her traditional woman’s skills into high-powered politics makes her the better politician and the better human being, but her gender-based superiority offers primarily an up-dated version of standard patriarchal assumptions. A sympathetic interpretation might serve to highlight her irony, self-confidence, and common sense, which make for a powerful and inspiring depiction of female strength, but these qualities remain anchored in maternity and domesticity. They are summoned to make the world a better place, appealing to traditional femininity to provide alternative political scenarios.  

One way of evaluating Shafi’s critique would be to note that she appreciates Grass’s complex depiction of the female character in this story, which—to spell out some of its implications—in the spirit of third-wave feminism suggests allegiances between various forms of disempowerment (the plight
of refugees in China and the predicament of women in the West), but she defends a brand of feminism which postulates that domesticity cannot be a choice and that a powerful woman cannot be cast in what is coded as patriarchal roles, such as motherhood and domesticity. But this kind of criticism, it is worth pointing out, was contested even among feminists of the second wave, who insisted that empowerment could be derived from a variety of experiences as long as they were chosen, and who supported motherhood and domesticity as viable options. To say that Grass’s character is a powerful one, but that her strength is diminished by the setting in which she is presented, is to fault the author for not subscribing to the same brand of feminism. And even if Shafi’s critique was left unquestioned, it would mean evaluating Grass’s work against a standard of absolute political correctness; or, shifting to the sphere of moral discourse, against a Levinasian ethics, in which the writer is held accountable for all the other Others, and critiqued for not making the effort to relinquish completely his own subjectivity and espouse absolutely, indefinitely, the perspective of all others. Superfluous to point out that the title My Century—and in this instance I would stress the first word slightly—would be unsuitable to such an endeavor.

To contemplate singularity from a slightly different angle, let us turn briefly to a text with the same title as Grass’s, Aleksander Wat’s autobiographical memoir My Century. In this book, the Polish poet Wat converses with his countryman the poet Czeslaw Milosz about life in midcentury Eastern Europe seen through the lens of his own spiritual struggle, imprisonment, and conversion from Judaism to Christianity after the night in which the sound of laughter brought to his Soviet cell the vision of “the devil in history.” There is no question of comparing the two accounts of “the century,” they are incommensurable in tenor, scope, emotional intensity. What I wish to suggest is that, while Wat’s life-shattering experiences, memories, and soul-searching give a very particular insight into the history of the past century, Grass’s first-person narrators give a different picture of it, but that neither can be discounted as accounts of “the century” on grounds of the subjectivity of their authors. Wat reflects:

Memories. What they say about the dying seeing their whole lives pass before their eyes like a movie in their last few minutes of life isn’t true. But in prison it is. Not in a few minutes, but over the course of time—time that grows incredibly distended and loses its substance. Time has to be endowed with substance; in prison, time is empty and has to be filled. And you fill it with the movie of your life, which is sometimes vivid, sometimes not so vivid.

How does “my life” become “my century”? And what happens when the life is “not so vivid,” when memories lack the clarity of lived experience? “Endow time with substance,” says Wat, describing the different ways this substance...
takes shape: soul searching (the pangs of conscience), what he calls a more vulgar form of inner life, “if-onlying,” and pure memories, “unaccompanied by pangs and that make no distinction between good and evil. Visual, or rather artistic, memories, free of morality.” Wat is very much aware that his testimony of the century is not based on raw facts. On the one hand, his life is exemplary because it is traversed by the fractures of history, by war and deportation, and his memories, populated by many individuals (more or less vivid in his recollection) and embedded in the life of a community, add up to a narrative that appears as a synecdoche of the century. On the other hand, he is very much aware of the imaginative dimension of the process of recollection, and that the “substance” spawned by his memory is a mixture of wishful thinking, moral evaluation, and “artistic” memories—that is, images transfigured by time. These do not compromise the testimonial relevance of the narrative, however, which is given by the unity of his experience. Differently put, the reader trusts Wat’s intention to testify.

How is this relevant to Grass, who invents most of his stories? Surely, one might say, there is a significant difference between an account that purports to be a reconstruction of the past, the most accurate possible to the best of the author’s knowledge, and a collection of stories, be they anchored in real events, with the occasional autobiographical reminiscence often impossible to disentangle, however, from the web of the fictionalized or the purely fictional? The difference is one of degree of imaginative investment, and Grass’s point, it seems to me, is precisely to question the claims to historical accuracy of historical narratives—the official historical records—that purport to provide an objective representation of things as they happened. This is not just a version of the distrust of “grand narratives” characteristic of late modernity, as Lyotard famously pointed out. In the German context, it speaks to two developments in the discourse about history: the emergence of a group of historians of the everyday in the 1980s and 1990s (Alltagsgeschichte) whose work still appears more legitimate abroad than in Germany, and the “memory contests” that have shown, especially since reunification, the plurality of historical perspectives and the imaginative mediation intervening in the reconstruction of the past.

In a study of German culture at the turn of the century suggestively entitled Phantoms of War, Anne Fuchs amends the traditional definition of autobiography as a representation of someone’s life as it happened: “While autobiography has a strong mimetic appeal, it should not be defined by its enhanced referentiality, but rather by its preoccupation with modern identity discourses.” And she goes on to note that in recent years the notion of life-writing has emphasized the performance of identity through storytelling, especially in the form of family narratives about the inheritance of the past, involving the often contradictory perspectives of multiple generations that imagine community and collective identity in very different ways. To convey this cultural complex, Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove have proposed the
notion of “memory contests,” which denotes “retrospective imaginings that simultaneously articulate, question and investigate the normative self-image of groups of people,” generating a pluralistic memory culture that does not enshrine a normative narrative and that acknowledges the intersection of history with personal experience.\(^{28}\) This might seem a paradox, given that the Nazi era has become increasingly distant. But this is precisely the problem: Germans are registering a shift of paradigm from communicative memory (based on the firsthand experience of the war generation) to so-called post-memory (when members of this generation have passed away, memory relies increasingly on repositories of the past and is thus mediated, self-conscious, often ironic, and potentially more sensitive to contestation because of its imaginative, affective investment).\(^{29}\) These issues have gained even more relevance after the German reunification, which gave renewed urgency to the question of reimagining national identity.

Susan Sontag’s contestation of the notion of collective memory strikes a note that is often present in the world of Grass’s characters. “What is called collective memory,” Fuchs and Cosgrove quote from Regarding the Pain of Others, is “not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds.”\(^{10}\) Several episodes in Grass’s tome stage situations in which different characters have different outlooks on, and relationships to, a past event: the story corresponding to the year 1964, for instance, is narrated by a woman who is accidentally present at the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt. Although advancing into the late months of pregnancy, she exposes herself to the revelations of Nazi horrors, and we see her successively intrigued, incredulous, shocked, and outraged. Her family, however, does not welcome her interest and provocations to share memories, especially her male relatives who rebuff her curtly:

“Lay off, will you? I was four, maybe five at the time. And you’d just been born.”

Right, but Heiner’s father and his uncle Kurt, who’s this real nice guy, they were both soldiers and in Russia too. Heiner’s mother once told me. But when the family finally all got together . . . , all they would say was, “We didn’t know a thing about that. When did you say it was? ’Forty-three? All we could think about then was retreat.” And Uncle Kurt said, “When we had to get out of the Crimea and could finally go home on furlough, what did we find but our houses in ruins. What do you hear about the Yanks and the Brits and their terrorist bombings? Not a word. And why? Because they won, and the losers are always to blame. So lay off, will you, Heidi?” (MC, 165–166)

But Heidi does not “lay off,” and eventually talks her husband Heiner into organizing a trip to Auschwitz. The family appears here as a site where two
generations enter into conflict, one standing behind an apologist victim discourse, the other assuming responsibility for the past. This story is most likely one in which the Grass “sound” makes itself heard in the insistence on the importance of assuming responsibility for the past. Similarly, the story corresponding to 1938, actually set in 1989, features a history teacher who instead of talking to his pupils about the importance of the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, insists on dwelling on the most gruesome details of another November 9, the Kristallnacht of 1938. The narrator is one of the children in the class, who admits, “It did start to get on our nerves hearing all those terrible things” (MC, 98). In response to the parents’ suggestion to get over his “obsession with the past,” the teacher insists in what might be Grass’s own voice that “no child could understand the end of the wall without knowing when and where things started going wrong and what actually led to Germany being divided” (MC, 97). Grass himself, as one of the most vocal representatives of the Hitler Youth generation that dominated for decades the political and cultural scene in postwar Germany, was unabashedly skeptical of the reunification. This turning point in the history of Germany—die Wende—marked a clear shift in the formulation of national identity, from a negative image dominated by the cultural work of overcoming the past (Vergangenheitsbewältigung) to a more positive one supported by center-right intellectuals. The latter’s dismissal of the discourse of contrition as in need of overcoming is articulated in Grass’s story by the narrator’s father: “‘Of course I’ve got nothing against my daughter learning about the atrocities the SA hordes committed all over the place and unfortunately here in Esslingen too, but there’s a time for everything. And that time is not now, when we finally have reason to rejoice and the whole world wishes us well’” (MC, 97).

The history teacher eventually gains the sympathy of the pupils through storytelling. This detail is significant, because it highlights Grass’s own reliance on storytelling in his engagement with the history of the past century. Like Benjamin, who contrasted the news avalanche with storytelling, Grass remains attached to the figure of the storyteller, in whom the chronicler of earlier times has survived. Grass the chronicler mobilizes his storytellers in a concerted effort to disrupt the very idea of a grand récit (which the title might have encouraged some readers to expect), countering the latter with a proliferation of anecdotal stories that engage in a subversive relation to the idea of “representation” (both in the sense of Darstellung, objective rendering of events, of history, and of political Vertretung, as we have seen).31 As Shafi usefully reminds us, new historicists like Joel Fineman, Catherine Gallagher, and Stephen Greenblatt emphasized the anecdotal in counterpoint to official historical discourses: anecdotes “would not, as in the old historicism, epitomize epochal truths, but would instead undermine them. The anecdotes would open history, or place it askew, so that literary texts could find new points of insertion. Perhaps texts would even shed their singular categorical identities, their division into ‘literary’ and ‘historical.’”32 A similar
agenda was pursued by German historians of the everyday, a group including Alf Lüdtke, Hans Medick, and Lutz Niethammer, who were uncomfortable with the insistence on “big structures, large processes, huge comparisons” in the established West German profession. In the way Geoff Eley describes the goal of Alltagsgeschichte in his foreword to The History of Everyday Life, one can easily recognize many of Grass’s own topics of predilection in My Century:

The goal was to develop a more qualitative understanding of ordinary people’s lives, both by investigating the material circumstances of daily existence at work, at home, and at play (“the production and reproduction of immediate life,” in Friedrich Engels’s well-known phrase) and by entering the inner world of popular experience in the workplace, the family and household, the neighborhood, the school—in short, all those contexts normally assigned to the cultural domain. By exploring social history in its experiential or subjective dimensions, it was argued, conventional distinctions between the “public” and the “private” might also be transcended, and a more effective way of making the elusive connections between the political and cultural realism be found. Moreover, the new advocates argued, it was precisely these “insides” of the “structures, processes and patterns” of social analysis—“the daily experiences of people in their concrete life situations, which also stamp their needs” that had previously been left out.

In keeping with the Alltagshistoriker’s perspective, skeptical of progress as the teleology of modernity, Grass’s My Century also privileges “a social history of subjective meanings derived from highly concrete microhistorical settings,” as if responding to Lüdtke’s insistence on the “need for decentralization of analysis and interpretation” through the careful construction of historical “miniatures,” especially featuring those individuals usually labeled the “little people,” the losers of history. This project also brings Grass in proximity to Pierre Bourdieu, whose work he admired, and who declared himself “very much” touched by many episodes in My Century. In a conversation with the French sociologist titled “A Literature from Below,” Grass speaks of the affinities that he sees between their work:

When I think of your book The Weight of the World or of my last book, My Century, I see that our works have something in common: We are trying to retell History, as seen from below. We do not talk over society’s head; we do not speak as conquerors of History; rather, in keeping with the nature of our profession, we are notoriously on the side of the losers, of those who are marginalized or excluded from society.
Unsurprisingly, the result is that some of the stories that focus on details of the “prose” of life seem inconsequential and their choice unjustified, because they trump the importance of events that proved to be epochal in the larger German community. And yet, Grass seems to insist, such “details” reveal contradictions and discontinuities in the fabric of history itself, such as in the 1989 story narrating the fall of the Wall as the backdrop to someone’s need to procure snow tires from an (apparently corrupted) acquaintance in East Berlin, well versed in the subtleties of the black market. Grass’s reservations about reunification, to his mind unjustifiable only on economic grounds, are here obvious.

The Love Parade that Grass evokes in the entry corresponding to 1995 sweeps all individuality away, and the world seems to have turned into an enormous party:36

What these young men and women want more than anything else is peace, peace on earth. But at the same time they want to show the world, “Hey, look, world! We are. And we are many. And we are different. We want to have fun. Fun, fun, and only fun.” And when it comes to fun, they have no inhibitions. Because, as they themselves put it, they’re different: they’re no thugs, either skinhead or terrorist; they’re no born-again sixty-eighthers, always against one thing or the other but never quite clear about what they’re for; they’re no goody-goodies with candle-light processions and false alarms about the threat of war. No, the young people of the nineties—they’re horses of many colors, so to speak. Just listen to their music, which some of you out there may think of as nothing but ear-splitting noise . . . , just listen to their music and you’ll know these young people are in love with themselves and with chaos and all they really care about is boom-booming their way to ecstasy. (MC, 260)

And the reporter’s comments continue:

You won’t be surprised to hear that name fashion designers are taking their lead, coming out with Love Parade lines, and the tobacco industry, Camel in particular, is featuring technodancers in its ads. By the way, nobody here bats an eyelid at all the advertising hoopla: this generation accepts capitalism hook, line, and sinker. The kids of the nineties are the kids of big business. They want to be the newest of the new and have the newest of the new. Which accounts in part for the popularity of the latest “high,” the latest “dope”—ecstasy. A very mellow young man I talked to a few minutes ago had this to say: “The world’s beyond saving, but it can still party.” (MC, 261)

As distorted echoes of Hannah Arendt’s premonition (that Benjamin stood on the threshold of the Last Judgment), such words could not sound more
Ironic. Grass is obviously not saluting or embracing all the developments of the twentieth century, and his writing about the reunification (a fait accompli), about the violence of xenophobic behaviors, or the prospect of a “fatherless future” reproducing itself through cloning does not imply a change of critical outlook on his part. But the “necromantic drama” he enacts in the 1999 episode, narrated by his resuscitated mother who recapitulates her life (and his), speaks to the awareness of one’s inevitable untimeliness. The mother’s acceptance that she is out of step with the times suggests the awareness that he, too, like the mother, and like everyone else, must have a unique perspective on the world, on his century. And if it is not sufficient that as a writer, he dealt with the stuff of the lives of others—the mother says: “I must say I like what he’s come up with. Even his cock-and-bull stories, as my husband called them, showed consideration for others” (MC, 272)—he offers, voiced by the mother, the disclaimer that fiction is the realm, for him, of a paradoxical authenticity: “That’s how he is. He gets the craziest ideas. Always exaggerating. You can’t believe a word he writes” (MC, 276). As Rebecca Braun has compellingly shown in a study of authorship in Grass’s work, this last entry is part of a concerted attempt on his part to undermine authorship: the author, she argues, “has mutated from fine representative of the power of imagination to a self-conscious liar whose grasp of reality is questionable. Collectively, the individual narratives undermine overblown notions of authorship, with Grass himself humorously presented as its most degenerate specimen at the end of the twentieth century.”37 The self-deprecatory gesture should, of course, not dupe us: it is still Grass staging the intervention of his mother, even as he seems to undermine his authorial position. What is highlighted with this last gesture is a century of imaginary portraits, of voices that, although they speak with Grass’s inflections and cannot make claims to all-inclusive representation, nonetheless point insistently to the relentless pluralism and difference of perspectives; differently put, a distantiability redefined as the demand for recognition of the human community as constitutive of every one of us.

Introducing August Sander’s 1929 gallery of portraits, titled Face of Our Time, Alfred Döblin articulates the significance of the singular, even as it forms an integral part of a composite whole: “Viewed from a certain distance,” he writes echoing Walter Benjamin’s reflections at the beginning of “The Storyteller,” “distinctions vanish; viewed from a certain distance, individuals cease to exist, and only universals persist. The distinction between the individual and the collective (or the universal), then—with the wisdom of a Solomon—becomes a matter of varying degrees of distance.”38 Identifying the value of Sander’s photographs in the achievement of a “scientific viewpoint” enabled through the juxtaposition of so many portraits, which leads to a comparison not unlike that of the anatomist, Döblin points out that the faces of these people coming from all walks of life inspire the desire
for narrative: “Entire stories could be told about many of these photographs, they are asking for it, they are raw material for writers, material that is more stimulating and more productive than many a newspaper report.”\textsuperscript{39} Grass’s tome does precisely this: it narrates stories, inchoate as they are, of everyday lives, composing a unique portrait—of the century, our time—of singular faces. How one measures the distance between self and others is the stuff not only of lived experience, but also—as reflection and exemplary practice—of literature.

In the last two chapters, my focus has been on Ernaux’s and Grass’s accounts of the myriad ways in which the time-fabric of one’s life is intricately woven with the lives of others; these texts, I have argued, contribute to a reimagining not only of community, but also of the self. Having allowed these questions to emerge from the literary texts, and having highlighted how such preoccupations blur generic distinctions, particularly between personal writing such as diary or autobiography, and fiction, in the final chapter I will return more explicitly to the philosophical reflection on community and the plural self, which I will put in conversation with \textit{In a Strange Room}, a novel by South African writer Damon Galgut. Like Ernaux’s diary of the outside, where imagining the lives of others in the third person brings her back to herself, and like Grass’s unusual (auto)biography of the century, where various characters, real and imagined, assume the first-person narrative voice, \textit{In a Strange Room} is a literary experiment: Galgut pushes the confusion of interpersonal boundaries (self/other) even further, oscillating between the first person of memoir and the third person of fiction when referring to the same character, which might, or might not, refer to himself. I offer the reading of this novel, which also takes us out of Europe to distant places where Europeans sometimes go on holiday, as a corrective to Peter Sloterdijk’s idiosyncratic account of everyday life as practice, an “acrobatics” driven by immunitary tendencies. As I will briefly indicate, the broader philosophical conversation here involves Jean-Luc Nancy and Roberto Esposito; but my aim is to show how, whereas Sloterdijk remains committed to a fashioning of the self, to a strong sense of self as the obvious premise of what he calls with a vague allusion to life in the Anthropocene “co-immunism,” Galgut’s literary experiment offers a piecemeal dramatization of depersonalization as crucial to reimagining an ethical community.