Ethics and the Dynamic Observer Narrator
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The conviction that narratives do something underpins both narrativist theories of coming to terms with the past and rhetorical narrative theory. So, too, does it underlie Günter Grass’s life and artistic production, both of which display a deep belief in the need for a break with the past and in the power of narrative to effect that break. In the 1961 novella *Cat and Mouse*, the narrator, Pilenz, receives advice that Grass might well have given himself: “You’ve got a style of your own: take up the fiddle or write yourself free—the good Lord knew what He was doing when He gave you talent” (529) [Sie verfügen doch . . . über eine eigenwillige Feder: greifen Sie zur Geige oder schreiben Sie sich frei—der Herrgott versah Sie nicht ohne Bedacht mit Talenten (4:106)]. Yet neither Pilenz nor Grass succeeds in writing himself free. In this chapter, I use the theories of linguistic performatives and speech acts developed by J. L. Austin and John Searle both to characterize Grass’s fictional and nonfictional writing as reliant on a faith in the power of a narrative.

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1. For a theoretical exploration of the relationship between narrative and performance, see Breger, *Narrative Performance*, 7–40.

2. Manheim’s translation altered. In this chapter, elisions in quotations are marked by an ellipsis in brackets, to distinguish them from the numerous ellipses in the original texts.
reckoning with the past, and to analyze why it so often fails.\textsuperscript{3} I examine how Grass's narrators try to “do things with words” and how they fail to meet the conditions of satisfaction that successful performatives require.\textsuperscript{4}

Some would say that Grass's own efforts to “do things with words” have been just as wanting. For more than five decades, Grass was a highly visible advocate for a German reckoning with the past. His political speeches and journalistic writing called for fellow Germans to confront and confess their past crimes and shared responsibility. From his debut novel \textit{The Tin Drum} (1959) [\textit{Die Blechtrommel}] to \textit{Cat and Mouse} to the novella \textit{Crabwalk} (2002) [\textit{Im Krebsgang}], his literary work critiqued Germany's mode of dealing with its National Socialist past and exhorted Germans to reflect on the degree to which their present identity has remained tied to, and constrained by, this past. In awarding him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1999, the Swedish Academy cited his literary efforts to “portray the forgotten face of history.”\textsuperscript{5}

Then, shortly before the publication of his autobiography in August 2006 (\textit{Peeling the Onion}), Grass stunned the world with a confession. In the last year of World War II, he had belonged to the notorious Waffen-SS. His revelation prompted a barrage of astonished commentary and criticism. For the most part, this criticism was not aimed at the fact itself; few faulted the seventeen-year-old Grass for his brief service, and Grass had long declared that, as a teenager, he had been an enthusiastic Nazi and a stubborn believer in Germany’s eventual victory. The outrage was directed instead at his delay in confessing the fact. Some called for him to renounce his Nobel Prize;\textsuperscript{6} others, defending the continuing value and merit of his literary work, nevertheless declared the “end of a moral authority” or expressed disappointment that he had remained silent about this episode for so long.\textsuperscript{7} The contradiction

\textsuperscript{3}. For another, complementary explanation of the lack of resolution, see Minden, “Figures of Shame,” 23–27. In Minden's reading, shame (as opposed to guilt) cannot be resolved because it attaches to a person, rather than to an act. Moreover, it occurs on the edges of identity, where the human meets society and is “implicated in . . . the collective existence of a given society,” and where values and codes are thrown into question. It thus shares many points of contact with the shift of identity associated with a reckoning with the past.

\textsuperscript{4}. Austin, \textit{How to Do Things}.

\textsuperscript{5}. “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1999.”

\textsuperscript{6}. The Associated Press reported in “Günter Grass gilt den meisten” that, in an interview with the \textit{Bild-Zeitung}, Lech Walesa had included the Nobel Prize in the list of honors Grass should relinquish. According to a poll by n-tv, the majority of Germans felt differently, however. Of those surveyed, only 8 percent thought he should have to sacrifice the prize, while 87 percent believed he should keep it.

\textsuperscript{7}. Grass's biographer Michael Jürgs was widely quoted as proclaiming that Grass's confession meant “the end of a moral authority.” See “Ende einer moralischen Instanz”; Keil, “Kritik und Verständnis.” Numbering himself among Grass's supporters, Erich Loest stated, “He is late, but he has still brought the truth to light. . . . But again: I don’t understand this long silence.” See Reents, “Er hätte sagen sollen.”
between his moralizing calls for confession and his own failure to confess brought disillusionment, and then discussion about whether his personal revelation must discredit his literary achievements.

I do not intend to intervene in this dispute or to judge Grass, perhaps Germany’s most prominent postwar literary figure, in political terms. Rather, sharing Paul Dawson’s conviction that both fictional and nonfictional writings operate as statements by the author in the public sphere, I examine how both develop Grass’s notion of the relationship between narrative and the past. Even as his work departs from a confidence in narrative’s performative power to break with the past, it shows a preoccupation with two narrative behaviors that undermine a confessional break: a litany-like language that encourages repetition rather than revision and the habit of deflecting attention from one’s own actions by focusing on others and their stories. In other words, Grass’s writing epitomizes the tension of the dynamic observer narrative in its simultaneous need for and self-reflexive questioning of narrative. My focus in this chapter will be on how Grass generates this tension stylistically and narratively, and on what these characteristics suggest about the general enterprise of a narrative reckoning with the past.

 Performative Language and Vergangenheitsbewältigung in the Federal Republic of Germany

Grass’s loud public calls for active engagement with the National Socialist past belonged to the current of postwar German thought and political culture in which the idea of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, or coming to terms with the past, arose. Proponents of such a reckoning called for self-reflection, confession, and the development of a new, untainted language and political culture that would allow Germans to break with past moral and interpretive frameworks and to lay the foundation for a democratic, moral future. Such ideas, which also inform current notions of transitional justice, rest on an implicit belief in the performative power of language; language not only describes one’s relationship to the past but can also define and change it. Austin first developed this idea of language’s power to “do” as well as to “state.” Although he initially distinguishes between “performative” and “constative” utterances (or statements), this demarcation quickly erodes. A confession, for instance, can be explicit: “I confess that I belonged to the National Socialist party,” but

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10. Austin, How to Do Things, 5.
the seemingly simple statement of fact, “I belonged to the National Socialist party,” may also count as a confession under certain circumstances. These dual functions emerge because a single utterance often contains three acts: a locutionary act, in which a verbal utterance bears some meaning; an illocutionary act, in which convention accords the utterance a certain force; and a perlocutionary act, in which the utterance generates an effect, whether intentional or not. The locutionary utterance “I belonged to the National Socialist Party” can, in certain circumstances, bear the illocutionary force of a confession. This confession, in turn, may provoke various perlocutionary responses; although the intended effect may be forgiveness, a confession may just as easily incite denigration, judgment, or identification.

To analyze how the confessional break with the past goes awry in Grass’s narrative Vergangenheitsbewältigung, I use the conditions of satisfaction that John Searle isolates as necessary for the successful execution of an illocutionary act. Four major conditions would need to be met for this confessional break to be “nondefective.” (1) The essential feature (or illocutionary point) of confession is the speaker’s admission of wrongdoing. (2) The propositional content of a confession, then, must be a statement of the speaker’s past actions. Grass, for instance, might say, “I believed in Hitler and joined the Waffen-SS.” (3) Preparatory conditions must also make the confession appropriate. Grass must have actually believed in Hitler and joined the SS; he must consider these acts to be wrong; and the facts must be unknown (or denied) prior to the confession. (4) The speaker must be sincere, having the psychological state appropriate to the illocutionary act. Grass must be convinced that he did believe in Hitler and join the SS, acknowledge that to do so was wrong, and feel remorse or guilt about it. In the case of a confessional break with the past, the preparatory and sincerity conditions are brought about by a critical break: a new moral framework causes the speaker to acknowledge previously accepted acts as wrong.

In the postwar Federal Republic of Germany, many saw individual and political self-examination and confession as illocutionary acts that could produce highly desirable perlocutionary effects: they were to transform Germany and its citizens, ushering in a positive future for the nation despite its

11. Ibid., 67–82.
12. Ibid., 94–147.
13. Austin terms intended perlocutionary effects “objects” and unintended ones “sequels” (118–19).
ugly past. Jaspers, for instance, began his 1947 lectures on *The Question of German Guilt* by rejecting the tendency he saw among Germans as a nation to evade responsibility for their situation by blaming others, particularly the occupation powers, for postwar conditions. Jaspers asserted that Germany's national and political regeneration could occur only if the members of its populace reckoned with their guilt on an individual level, by undergoing a process he termed purification. This purification, although it encompasses outward acts of restitution and atonement, rests on “inner renewal and metamorphosis”; it “is an inner process which is never ended but in which we continually become ourselves.”15 This characterization of the process suggests that, while it also satisfies the desire to do justice to the past, its primary aim is to provide hope for the future: “clarification of guilt,” Jaspers insists, “is at the same time clarification of our new life and its possibilities.”16 Among the possibilities such a new life offers is the promise of freedom, both individual and political. Indeed, this freedom seems to be the goal of Jaspers's lectures: “For only consciousness of guilt leads to the consciousness of solidarity and co-responsibility without which there can be no liberty. . . . In short: without purification of the soul there is no political liberty.”17

Adorno and the Mitscherlichs also traced the ills of postwar German society and politics to a lack of individual reckoning with the past. As the Mitscherlichs' title and presentation of psychological case studies reveals, they believed that the “principles of collective behavior” reside in individual neuroses and behaviors rooted in a denial of past guilt and trauma; Adorno's advocacy for psychoanalysis or comparable self-reflection shared a similar impulse.18 Like Jaspers, Adorno saw a self-critical engagement with the past as the key to understanding and strengthening the self; fundamentally, such engagement consists of a “turn toward the subject: reinforcement of a person's self-consciousness and, with that, of a sense of self.”19 This increase in self-awareness or self-confidence permits the individual subject, now seen as a citizen, to view himself as a subject rather than an object of social and political processes. In other words, fortification of the self facilitates both independent action and a sense of responsibility for the action of the whole. Adorno maintained that such identification with the democratic system was lacking in the German population. Because the people failed to see themselves as active subjects of the political system, the population as a whole

16. Ibid., 113.
17. Ibid., 114–15.
failed to recognize that system “as the expression of their own maturity” or the “union of the individual and the collective interest.” The result was social and political apathy and disengagement. This disengagement, which persisted into the full blossoming of the *Wirtschaftswunder* [economic miracle] of the 1950s and early 1960s, prompted the Mitscherlichs’ work as well. The individual failure to confront the past led to a “blockage of social imagination [and] tangible lack of social creativity,” “sterile patterns of reaction,” and “psychic immobilism in the face of the acute problems confronting German society.” Like Adorno’s Germans, the Mitscherlichs’ Germans had failed to identify with their country’s postwar democracy, instead associating themselves solely with its economic system. All three of these writers on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (and contemporaries of Grass) thus conceived of individual self-reflection about the past as the condition for a future that held out the hope of personal and political freedom.

As a public and political figure, Grass displayed a similar point of view. In his famous letter to Kurt Georg Kiesinger published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on December 1, 1966, for instance, Grass exhorted Kiesinger to remove himself from consideration for the post of chancellor. Although he maintained that Kiesinger’s membership in the National Socialist party and service as director of radio broadcasts in Ribbentrop’s foreign ministry were understandable on a human level, he asserted that this past compromised Kiesinger’s ability to lead Germany into a respected and democratic future. Grass ends his letter with a series of questions that ask Kiesinger to consider how his history will affect Germany’s future if he becomes chancellor. In a 1967 campaign speech, Grass called on voters to undertake a similar self-questioning and to recognize that adherence to old values endangered the country’s fragile democracy. Individuals had to learn to view their pasts in a new and painful light. His example is of particular relevance for the novella *Cat and Mouse*, the key event of which is the protagonist’s theft of a war hero’s

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20. Ibid., 118.
22. Ibid., 26–27.
23. Although Jaspers, Adorno, and the Mitscherlichs all stress the democratic freedom that self-reflective engagement with the past can bring, none contends that it is possible to leave the past behind. Jaspers holds that the moral and metaphysical guilt borne by Germans who lived through the war “are by their very nature not atoned for. They do not cease. Whoever bears them enters upon a process lasting all his life.” Jaspers, *Question of German Guilt*, 111. Adorno writes that to attempt to escape this past is unjust, for it is still “intensely alive” in German society. “Coming to Terms,” 115. For a comparable statement by the Mitscherlichs, see ch. 1, n. 11.
Knight’s Cross. In the speech Grass calls on those who had been decorated with the Knight’s Cross to acknowledge the senselessness of their courage and sacrifice and the systemic criminality and murder that the cover of war made possible. Refusing to wear his decoration, a self-reflective soldier would eschew the “wrongful upholding of tradition” [falsche Traditionspflege] and continued celebration of military heroism, instead recognizing that the democratic postwar nation requires a different kind of bravery: “Our country demands civil, not military, courage” [Unser Land verlangt nach ziviler und nicht nach militärischer Tapferkeit].

This same impulse toward reevaluation and the renewal it promises permeated much of the era’s discussion about poetics and literary production. In the decades following the war, writers and cultural critics, particularly those who had been in exile and those of the emerging postwar generation, declared the necessity of breaking with the linguistic and literary traditions that had been polluted by their support of the National Socialist regime. Poetic practice had to reclaim the German language to affirm the new reality, values, and hopes of the German people. The sense of urgency about this mission came not only from a generalized need to abandon the language of the past but also from the specific character of National Socialist language. Postwar critics saw this language as having a performative effect diametrically opposed to self-examination and confession: in its reliance on and elevation of ritualized language, it encouraged an unexamined affirmation of old beliefs and an abdication of personal responsibility. The nature of the language itself worked against a critical break and a reckoning with the past.

Ritualized language is not deficient or despicable in itself; “uttering certain words” is an essential component of performatives of many kinds. But seen from a postwar German perspective, ritualized National Socialist language became the foundation of a litany that necessarily undermined efforts for Vergangenheitsbewältigung. The utterance of litany is a speech act in which a community affirms its articles of belief by repeating conventionalized language. Under National Socialism, secular litany was a powerful mode of bringing Germans everywhere to affirm and circulate the party’s propaganda and articles of belief in everyday interactions and activities. To continue to use that language in the postwar context was to continue to affirm those views. Second, while litany relies on communal recitation of ritual language, the speech act of confession demands an individual utterance that details the specific act the individual has committed: such a confession cannot be captured in ritual

25. Ibid., 11:243. Grass never suggests that the decorated soldiers themselves might be guilty of murder or crimes.

language. By providing communal, formulaic expressions for portraying the past, such language absolves the individual of responsibility for addressing his own history. Under the rule of National Socialism, litany encouraged a culture of belief and obedience, a squelching of individual initiative within a quest for a homogenous, unified national community. Such systemic suppression of individual responsibility was exactly what postwar advocates of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* wanted to dismantle.

In 1947 Victor Klemperer provided the first analysis of the role language played in supporting National Socialist culture and policy, publishing revised excerpts from his wartime journals under the title *LTI: A Philologist’s Notebook* [*LTI (Lingua Tertii Imperii): Notizbuch eines Philologen*]. For the most part, Klemperer’s study analyzes the lexical features of National Socialist language. But as he describes the way these lexical features were deployed, he paints that language as deriving its incredible power less from the rhetorical genius of the speeches of Hitler or Goebbels than from its formulaic reproduction. According to Klemperer, National Socialism gained control through “the individual words, the expressions, and the sentences that it imposed on the masses in millions of repetitions and that the masses adopted mechanically and unconsciously.”

In their unconscious, mechanized speech acts, the masses affirmed National Socialist ideology and institutions. For Klemperer, this mechanical repetition leveled all difference within the German people by creating a homogenous national language. In sketching the fundamental poverty of that language, he casts Goebbels as National Socialism’s linguistic dictator. By the later years of the war, Goebbels’s Friday radio broadcasts determined what would be printed and opined for the following week; he and a select few others established “the only valid linguistic model. . . . Indeed, at the end it was perhaps Goebbels alone who determined what language was permitted” (32). In this system of “clichés predetermined for everyone,” the voices of individual Germans merged together (32). Klemperer abhors this eradication of the individual that linguistic dictation enacts. In Klemperer’s view, such linguistic practice transforms the people into an animalistic or inanimate mass driven by forces over which they have no control: “The *LTI* is aimed toward robbing the individual of his separate existence, numbing him as a personality, making him into an unthinking and undesiring member of a herd that is driven and hunted in a particular direction, into an atom in a rolling block of stone” (33).

In fact, Klemperer compares National Socialist language to religious dogma, denouncing the perverted “language of belief” that National Socialism

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derived from Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular (143). Nor is Klemperer the only one to understand National Socialist language in this way. In his 1990 lecture *Writing after Auschwitz* [hereafter *Writing; Schreiben nach Auschwitz*] Grass described himself and his contemporaries at the end of the war as having been stunted by secular National Socialist dogma, or “articles of faith” [Glaubenssätze (12:239)]. Many postwar writers wanted, above all, to break with these National Socialist “articles of faith,” and attempts at a new language and literature surfaced almost immediately after the war’s end, in the movements that came to be known as *Trümmerliteratur* [rubble literature] and poetic *Kahlschlag* [clear-cutting]. In his introduction to a 1947 anthology of poems written in prisoner-of-war camps, Hans Werner Richter justified its publication by referring to the new “tone” that suffused this writing. This tone was, above all, one of realism in content and style, and Richter saw in this realism the hope for regeneration.28 Early hopes for a new literature and a new language were largely dashed in both East and West in the 1950s, however.29 Thus, in 1962 the poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger was still insisting on the need for revolutionary poetry properly understood: for a poetry that strove to effect revolutionary change in society through its innovative use of language, rather than in overt support of a political program.30

Decades later, Grass outlined the “commandments” of literary production for his generation in the first postwar decades. Their writing was to jettison “belief” and embrace “doubt” (*Writing* 12:246). For Grass as for Enzensberger, this doubt was to manifest itself in language itself, by eschewing bombastic color and “ideological black-and-white” [ideologische[s] Weiß oder Schwarz] and revealing the potential of a more subtle exploration of the world:

> In addition, this commandment demanded richness of another kind: the sorry beauty of all recognizable shades of gray was to be celebrated with the means of a damaged language. That meant lowering the flag and spreading ashes on geraniums.

> Obendrein verlangte dieses Gebot Reichtum neuer Art: mit den Mitteln beschädigter Sprache sollte die erbärmliche Schönheit aller erkennbaren Graustufungen gefeiert werden. Das hieß, jene Fahne zu streichen und Asche auf Geranien zu streuen. (*Writing* 12:246)

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29. See Ralf Schnell’s *Geschichte der deutschsprachigen Literatur seit 1945* (61–225) for a balanced and thorough assessment of developments in both the FRG and the GDR.
Like Enzensberger, Grass sought a language whose very existence would critique the status quo and point toward the future. As the percussive and glass-shattering modes of expression of his most famous character, Oskar Matzerath, demonstrate, he sought a language that disrupted rather than smoothed, rankled rather than soothed—one diametrically opposed to the lulling rhythms of ritualized language.

**Litany in *Cat and Mouse***

*A Future in the Past*

If *The Tin Drum* shatters a ritualized language of avoidance, *Cat and Mouse* shows that language in action. In combination with the narrator’s ruinous lack of self-examination, this language undermines the reckoning with the past that the narrator—and the Germany he represents—desperately need. The novella consists of the narrator Pilenz’s retrospective account of his boyhood with the protagonist, Joachim Mahlke, in Danzig during the Third Reich. Pilenz’s brief and scattered metanarrative statements show that he intends his story to be a freeing confession. In the quotation cited in this chapter’s opening, a clerical friend, Pater Alban, encourages Pilenz to “write [himself] free” of what Pilenz calls the story of “cat and mouse and *mea culpa*” (529, 517) [Katz und Maus und mea culpa (4:106, 86)]. Pilenz tries to follow this advice, admitting, “I am writing, because I must be rid of it” [ich schreibe, denn das muß weg (4:89)]. The novella begins with an anecdote illustrating Mahlke’s status as a bullied outcast, and its various episodes recount the ridicule he suffers for his physical appearance and his passionate religious devotion. Over time, however, Pilenz and his classmates are moved to grudging admiration as Mahlke develops amazing diving skills and makes himself a hideaway in a sunken ship; steals a Knight’s Cross from a war hero who visits the boys’ school and is expelled as a result; and himself wins a Knight’s Cross for his bravery and feats as a tank gunner. Mahlke’s story ends when, refused the honor of appearing as a war hero at his former school, he deserts from the army and asks Pilenz to ferry him to his aquatic hideaway. Pilenz’s help is as ambivalent as his feelings, and his last glimpse of Mahlke is the naked feet that kick down into the water as the boy dives. The book ends with Pilenz’s vain attempts to find Mahlke after the war.

Despite Pilenz’s stated intention to write about his own guilt, the novella
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displays anything but the straightforward report of misdeeds and the sincere remorse that the confessional act demands: Pilenz constantly equivocates about his actions and attitudes toward Mahlke. The opening anecdote establishes this pattern. In this scene, which yields the novella's title and central symbolic image, a young cat attacks the “mouse” of Mahlke's enormous Adam's apple as he lies dozing on an athletic field amidst a group of his classmates. Although later discussions of the incident reveal Pilenz as the likely instigator of the attack, his initial description of it obscures the agent, suggesting uncertainty as to whether the cat acted independently or whether he or one of the other boys brought it to pounce. Subsequent reports of the event name various perpetrators, and Pilenz either interrupts them when they threaten to isolate him as the prankster or refrains from commenting on the accuracy of reports that name others (483, 489, 525, 528, 538). The final episode of Mahlke's desertion, too, is riddled with uncertainties generated by Pilenz's narrative contradictions and obfuscations. He reports that Mahlke's mother is not home when he goes to get him provisions for his dive into the ship, but when Mahlke asks about her, Pilenz implies that she has been taken away because of Mahlke's desertion from the army. His account of the last minutes before Mahlke descends into the ship obscures whether he reminds Mahlke to take the can opener crucial to his survival or conceals it from him so that he will leave it behind (although he clearly pitches it into the ocean after Mahlke has dived). Finally, it is unclear whether he ever intended to go back to help his friend (although, again, it is clear that he never does). In his “confessional” narration, Pilenz blurs his account of his potential “crimes.”

Another crucial instance of narrative obfuscation occurs when Pilenz converts the ambivalently perceived Joachim Mahlke of his childhood into the “Great Mahlke” he attempts to construct in his adult recollections. Pilenz reports that after the Knight's Cross is stolen, the other boys quickly conclude that Mahlke must be responsible. After a moment of hesitation, Pilenz credits himself with coining the nickname that attributes legendary status to Mahlke, the former outcast: “But Schilling, no, it was I, dreamed up a new title. [. . .] ‘The great Mahlke. The Great Mahlke did it, only the Great Mahlke can do such things’” (515) [Nur Schilling, nein ich führte einen neuen Begriff ein, sagte [. . .] “Der große Mahlke. Das hat, das kann nur, das tat der Große Mahlke” (4:83)]. In the next paragraph, Pilenz reiterates and secures his role in this conversion of the temporarily admired “great Mahlke” into “the Great Mahlke,” insisting that “my spontaneous cry” (515) [erst mein spontaner Ruf (4:83)] spawned a fitting nickname for the boys' peculiar peer. Pilenz's moments of narrative equivocation show that, rather
than enacting a confession, his narrative undertakes a strained act of narrative commemoration of Mahlke.

Pilenz’s insistence that he is telling Mahlke’s story, rather than his own, makes visible the impulse that informs almost all of the dynamic observer narratives, and one that necessarily undermines the act of confession: the narrators’ avoidance of self-examination via a determined focus on their protagonists. The novella’s first sentence locates the opening anecdote within Mahlke’s development and life (it takes place “after Mahlke had learned to swim” [469]), and the remainder of the narrative focuses on Mahlke’s exploits as a schoolboy and a young war hero. In the past-tense narrative, Pilenz functions primarily as a witness to these deeds, and his appearances as historian and writer in the frame narrative are brief, offering little information about his adult life. While Mahlke’s full name appears on the first page, Pilenz tells more than half of his story before naming himself, and even then insists that his first name is irrelevant (517). Metanarrative commentary reveals his conscious effort to focus on his friend. After a brief report of where he lived as a boy, Pilenz interrupts himself: “But this isn’t supposed to be about me, my story is about Mahlke, or Mahlke and me, but always with the emphasis on Mahlke” (479) [doch soll nicht von mir die Rede sein, sondern von Mahlke oder von Mahlke und mir, aber immer im Hinblick auf Mahlke (4:22)].

Pilenz’s repeated apostrophe to the absent Mahlke also aids him in deflecting attention from himself and his guilt. With each “you,” he directs readers’ attention to the other boy. Even as the apostrophe presupposes Mahlke’s absence, as it does in the conventions of traditional lyric poetry, Pilenz’s continual attempts at conversation with his “friend” show him trying desperately to conjure Mahlke in the present, a feat that would obviate his need for confession. As it encourages readers to focus on a larger-than-life Mahlke in past and present, the apostrophe displaces Pilenz’s intended admission of guilt with a memorialization.

Memorialization is another avenue to a reckoning with the past, of course, and, as a form of restitution, can be a responsible reaction to guilt. Yet Pilenz does not succeed in memorialization, either. His depictions of Mahlke are ambivalent, and the narrative as a whole provides a remarkably

32. Manheim’s translation altered. Similar statements appear on 495, 529, and 535.
33. On apostrophe as an attempt at invocation, see Johnson, “Apostrophe”; Kacandes, Talk Fiction, ch. 4; Waters, Poetry’s Touch, 49. On apostrophe in Cat and Mouse, see Kacandes, Talk Fiction, 162–70.
34. Adorno writes in “Coming to Terms” that when the crimes of the Holocaust are forgotten or denied, “the murdered are . . . cheated even out of the one thing that our powerlessness can grant them: remembrance” (117).
flat picture of the boy.\textsuperscript{35} Instead, in an unintended perlocutionary effect, the narrative ambiguities in his account of Mahlke suggest the contours of the shadowy and marginal Pilenz, much as Jonathan Culler argues that lyric apostrophe emphasizes the speaker’s act of poetic self-constitution.\textsuperscript{36} This inadvertent illumination of Pilenz’s present position is predictable from a narratological standpoint; each statement he makes about Mahlke in the past gives contour to his own present identity by revealing his attitudes toward and thoughts about his “friend.” It is also congruent with Werner Wertgen’s understanding of the “performative symbolic acts” that constitute many efforts at \textit{Vergangenheitsbewältigung}. Such acts cannot change the past, but are aimed at transforming their agents’ present identities.\textsuperscript{37} Pilenz’s narrative strategies are determined not only by the demands of representing his object but, more importantly, by the image of himself he wishes to project.\textsuperscript{38} In Searle’s terms, the perlocutionary effects he seeks are aimed primarily at himself;\textsuperscript{39} his ostentatious and ambivalent hero-worship notwithstanding, he hopes to influence his audience’s “feelings, attitudes, and subsequent behavior” toward himself, rather than toward Mahlke. The aim of confession is, after all, forgiveness or absolution.

Or, for Pilenz, freedom. But the audience of Pilenz’s text is unauthorized to forgive and seems unlikely to absolve,\textsuperscript{40} and the glimpses the text gives of Pilenz’s postwar life show that he remains bound to his past. Trapped by his “gloomy conscience” (535) [mürrische[s] Gewissen (4:116)], he resentfully earns a modest living as a social worker in a residential facility he rarely leaves. His only real human contact appears to be with Pater Alban, and, night after night, their interactions circle around Mahlke or pass in endless, issueless conversations about faith. Despite his occupation, he thus displays

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\item \textsuperscript{35} In fact, it can provide no real picture at all. Neither Pilenz nor his friends can remember what Mahlke looked like, and Pilenz recognizes that his lack of intimacy with Mahlke bars him from depicting his inner life (489, 485). With the exception of occasional speculation about Mahlke’s thoughts and feelings, Pilenz reports only Mahlke’s observable actions. This style may be read as noncommittal or as simultaneously truthful and superficial, as in Hollington, \textit{Günter Grass}.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Culler, \textit{Pursuit of Signs}, 143.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Wertgen, \textit{Vergangenheitsbewältigung}, 329–30. Like Austin and Searle, Wertgen specifies that such acts can fail if those performing them do so in bad faith, for instance, if they employ them for deceptive purposes (330).
\item \textsuperscript{38} See also Bruce, “Equivocating Narrator,” 144–49; Pickar, “Intentional Ambiguity,” 236–37. On the effects of Pilenz’s narrative equivocation, see Fickert, “Use of Ambiguity”; Spaethling, “Günter Grass.”
\item \textsuperscript{39} On perlocutionary acts, see Austin, \textit{How to Do Things}, 117–20; Searle and Vanderveken, “Illocutionary Logic,” 118–19.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Searle specifies that perlocutionary effects are never guaranteed. Searle and Vanderveken, “Illocutionary Logic,” 119.
\end{itemize}
the kind of detachment from and apathy about society that Adorno and the Mitscherlichs bemoan. In fact, with the exception of his almost compulsive music consumption (itself a seeming attempt to top his youthful experiences with Mahlke), he mentions contact with the outside world only in connection with his ongoing search for his lost classmate. The book ends with brief accounts of three failed attempts to locate his friend. He watches films of diving expeditions in hopes of seeing Mahlke’s face emerge from a diving helmet, attends circuses to ask the clowns about a colleague named Mahlke, and travels to a meeting of Knight’s Cross recipients to have Sergeant Mahlke paged to the door. But Mahlke never appears, and Pilenz is left to ask, “Who will supply me with a good ending?” (556) [wer schreibt mir einen guten Schluß? (4:150)]. The self-examination and confession that were the touchstones of calls for postwar Vergangenheitsbewältigung—including Grass’s own public statements—fail miserably in his novella. Pilenz’s confession fails to fulfill the essential condition of satisfaction for confession, and its propositional content is all wrong: rather than detailing his own past misdeeds or omissions, Pilenz deflects attention from himself with an (also inadequate) memorialization and invocation of Mahlke.41

Litanies of a National Socialist Childhood

Grass’s novella also exposes the forces that hinder Pilenz’s confession: the persistence of the old moral framework and language that Pilenz claims to have left behind. This framework prevents him from fully inhabiting the psychological state appropriate to the act of confession. Like Klemperer’s and Grass’s nonfiction writing, Cat and Mouse compares National Socialism’s language to the ritualized language of belief found in traditional religion, demonstrating how National Socialism transformed secular language into a litany that encouraged communal affirmation of its ideology; the novella also depicts these habits of rote, communal recital carrying over to Pilenz’s peer group’s discussions of Mahlke. An abundance of secondary literature considers the novella’s depictions of religious iconography, practice, and belief, but none links the ritualized language within the past-tense story to the language of Pilenz’s narrative reckoning with his past.42 I contend that the novella

41. For a similar reading, see Gerhard Kaiser, Günter Grass, 40.
42. Mahlke’s obsessive and sexually tinged adoration of the Virgin Mary has often been interpreted as analogous to a fanatical devotion to Hitler. Thomas, “Religious Themes,” 231–34; Leonard, Günter Grass, 36. Others note the text’s depiction of the church’s collusion with the National Socialists and the machinery of war. See Frank-Raymund Richter, Vergangenheitsbewältigung, 44; Reddick, “Danzig Trilogy” 166; Neuhaus, Günter Grass, 74. Pilenz has been
presents Pilenz’s acculturation to these litanies as a key factor in the failure of his postwar confession. By revealing the similarity between ritualized wartime languages and Pilenz’s postwar story, the novella posits a continuity underlying the supposed critical break of the war’s end. The postwar confession is thwarted because the narrator is still under the thrall of (or hiding behind) the affirmative language of his boyhood.

The most striking illustration of the convergence of religious and secular language occurs in a scene that Pilenz dismisses as peripheral to his story of Mahlke. There, Pilenz describes the deplorable behavior of his fellow altar boys, who carry on a conversation about military statistics during mass. A punctuated sequence from the opening of the mass demonstrates the result, as snippets of liturgical Latin and military statistics follow one upon the other. The lines cited from the mass associate the approach to God with youth and strength—virtues of a military culture—and affirm the eternity of the military-religious complex:

“I will go the altar of God—Say, when was the cruiser Eritrea launched?—Thirty-six. Special features?—To God who gives joy to my youth—Only Italian cruiser in East African waters. Displacement?—God, my strength [. . .] And I will go to the altar of God [. . .] As it was in the beginning [. . .] is now and ever shall be [. . .] and in ages of ages, Amen.” (495)


By inserting military language into the rehearsed repetition of the liturgical service, this passage depicts a ritualized litany of war. The question-and-


43. Roman Catholic liturgical texts appear at several crucial junctures in the action, as well, illuminating the relationship between Mahlke and Pilenz (535, 545–46).

44. Manheim’s translation retains the Latin to preserve the effect of the original; I provide a translation here to make Grass’s commentary accessible.
answer format of the boys’ conversation echoes the call and response of liturgical litany, and their unerring recitation demonstrates their complete command of the militaristic, militarized affirmation of faith. Elsewhere, Pilenz uses the verb “vorbeten” (4:29) [to lead a prayer; to hold forth] to describe the boys’ knowledge of the Polish fleet.45

In fact, a ritualized secular language permeates all spheres of the boys’ lives. Military institutions, school officials, journalistic public discourse, and athletic organizations all produce variants of the same repetitive, litany-like language, a ubiquity that corresponds to claims that National Socialist language penetrated all spheres of life.46 Two formal features, fused phrases and ellipses, set this formulaic language off from “normal” discourse. Graphically most striking are the phrases that eliminate the spacing between words, transforming statements into units of indivisible meaning that resemble what Bakhtin terms authoritative discourse. The headmaster Klohse emits a torrent of such phrases as he concludes the presentation by the first military hero to visit Mahlke and Pilenz’s school. Strung together with dashes, the phrases resemble the beads of a rosary as they extol the virtues of military readiness and self-sacrifice and link them to the German literary tradition:

“Those who come after us—And in this hour—When the traveler returns—but this time the homeland—and let us never—quick tough hard—pure of heart—as I said before—pure of heart—and if anyone disagrees let—and in this hour—keep clean—to conclude with the words of Schiller—if your life you don’t stake—the laurel never will you take—and now back to work!” (499)47

“The wanderer comes to you—And in this hour—When the traveler returns—but this time the homeland—and let us never—quick tough hard—pure of heart—as I said before—pure of heart—and if anyone disagrees let—and in this hour—keep clean—to conclude with the words of Schiller—if your life you don’t stake—the laurel never will you take—and now back to work!” (4:55)

The phrase “Wandererkommstdu” further truncates a Greek line praising Spartan military bravery that Heinrich Böll had used as a title for his 1950 story, “Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa . . . ” Like Cat and Mouse, this story

45. Grass also uses the verb “to pray” to describe his boyhood knowledge of maritime statistics in Beim Häuten der Zwiebel (Werke, 10:220). Cf. the translation in Grass, Peeling the Onion, 13.
47. Manheim’s translation slightly altered.
reflects critically on National Socialism’s appropriation of the humanistic tradition and on the educational system’s role in converting a generation of idealistic schoolboys into soldiers. The two phrases “ifyourlifeyoudonot-stake—the laurel never will you take” [Setzet nicht lebenein niewirdeuchgewonnen-nensein] are sung twice in succession in a song that celebrates the soldier’s life just before the curtain falls in the eleventh scene of Schiller’s *Wallenstein’s Camp* [*Wallensteins Lager*]. Klohse’s recitation omits three syllables from each line, changing Schiller’s varied meter into a sing-song meter reminiscent of nursery rhyme. If a glorious military tradition had ever existed, National Socialism’s twisted repetitions of it—in speech acts as well as military ones—undermine its successful replication.

The fused phrases concretize the monolithic nature of the speech’s authoritative discourse, which “enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass.” Pilenz presents them as calcified chunks of ideology and nonsense (or nonsense ideology), discredited expressions of the rejected authority of National Socialism that appear as “an object, a relic, a thing.” Bakhtin asserts that “authoritative discourse cannot be represented—it is only transmitted”; as a result, he holds that it plays little role in the dialogic discourse of the novel, where it can appear only as “a dead quotation.” In Grass’s novella, however, these “dead quotations” play a central role. While the novel depicts them as inert, anachronistic holdovers from a dead (and, coincidentally, authoritarian) language and moral framework, it also illustrates their power as speech acts of affirmation.

Ellipses used to conclude phrases often serve a similar function. Klohse begins his speech introducing the second war hero with quotations that appear as clichéd, cemented phrases. As he moves to welcome the speaker to the podium, however, he offers a seemingly inconclusive statement: “One of us, from our midst, a product of our school and its spirit, and in this spirit let us . . .” (507) [Einer von uns, aus unserer Mitte, aus dem Geist unseres Gymnasiums hervorgegangen, und in diesem Sinne wollen wir . . . (4:69)]. The incomplete statements and ellipses seem at first to suggest what Bakhtin calls internally persuasive discourse. Unlike authoritative discourse, such discourse is open and can be adapted to new contexts and meanings: it “awakens new and independent words, . . . and does not remain in an isolated and static

50. Ibid., 344.
51. Ibid.
condition.” But Klohse’s statements in fact evoke the same kind of inviolable units of fixed meaning (or of no meaning at all) as the fused phrases present. The ellipses signal a conclusion that need not be written because it follows so self-evidently from the introduction. In describing the first military hero’s speech, W. G. Cunliffe says that Grass marks the falsity of this speech “by running together incomplete commonplace phrases with the air of one who is too weary to trouble finishing them.” In the case of the ellipses, too, repetition has made language and its meaning predictable and durable. Many of the ellipses contained in the second military hero’s speech, as well as those that conclude Klohse’s announcement of Mahlke’s expulsion from school, produce a comparable effect (508, 521). The two reports of Mahlke’s military achievements at the end of chapter 11, although in a slightly different form, amount to the same thing. Closing with the words “and furthermore, etcetera etcetera” (538) [und so weiter und so weiter (4:121)] followed by a period, both the parade ground announcement and the newspaper article explicitly signal the continuation of the familiar rhetoric. The nearly identical language of the two reports indicates the degree to which the discourses of military parade ground and “civilian” newspaper have merged, again reflecting the “truly totalitarian” language of the National Socialist state. Finally, because many of the novella’s Roman Catholic texts appear in the same form, the book underscores the similar form and function of the ritualized languages of National Socialism and of traditional religion.

If the novella’s fused phrases and concluding ellipses evoke the repetitions and established meanings of litany, several of the text’s direct discourse exchanges mimic its call-and-response format, highlighting the way litany organizes individuals into a communal body that shares and affirms knowledge and beliefs. The novella’s most extended passages of direct discourse record the two military heroes’ speeches and the exchanges between Mahlke and Pilenz in the final scenes, but much of the remaining dialogue occurs in brief conversations whose speakers remain unidentified. The three longest of these depict schoolboy chatter about Mahlke and his athletic and military feats (483, 538, 548–49). In these segments, each speaker contributes only a short statement or question, each of which is set off by a paragraph break. Many of these utterances express incomplete thoughts or leave their referents

52. Ibid., 345–46.
55. Examples include a snippet from a Lenten service, Mahlke’s beloved Stabat dolorosa, and Father Gusewski’s final celebration of communion (477, 535, 545–46).
unidentified and can be understood only in the context of the conversation or of a previously existing common body of knowledge:

“What’s the matter with him?”
“I say he’s got a tic.”
“Maybe it’s got something to do with his father’s death.”
“And what about all that hardware on his neck?”
“And he’s always running off to pray.”
“And he don’t believe in nothing if you ask me.”
“For that he’s too realistic.”
“And what about that thing on his neck?”
“You ask him, you’re the one who [verb missing] the cat [preposition missing] him . . .” (483)56

“Was hat er nur?”
“Der hat nen Tick, sag ich.”
“Vielleicht hängt das mit dem Tod von seinem Vater zusammen.”
“Und die Klamotten am Hals?”
“Und ewig rennt er beten.”
“Dabei glaubt er an nischt, sag ich.”
“Da ist er viel zu sachlich für.”
“Und das Dinglamdei und nun auch noch das?”
“Frag du ihn, du hast ihm doch damals die Katze . . .” (4:28)

This format, visually arresting in a text whose sparse dialogue is otherwise incorporated into longer paragraphs, demonstrates the communal nature of the meaning being constructed. The line breaks emphasize that distinct individuals utter each statement, but the statements’ anonymity indicates the irrelevance of those individuals’ identities; their voices are registered only insofar as they belong to the group. As this group speaks, it constructs a single unit of meaning, a shared assessment of Mahlke’s personality. Beginning with a call and response of question and answers, the conversation proceeds with each speaker adding an observation or explanation. The statements’ seemingly final periods are belied by their initial words; in a string of five statements, four begin with coordinating conjunctions. The exchange demonstrates the way individual language and identity are subsumed by the shared opinions and

56. Manheim completes the phrase “sicked the cat on him,” but the original obscures the crucial information by leaving out the verb and preposition.
meanings generated in the litany-like language of Pilenz’s childhood. The perlocutionary effect of the litany is, as Klemperer notes, a dissolution of individual identity. The exchange also ends with the telltale ellipsis . . .

Litanies of a Postwar Narrative

. . . just as Pilenz’s postwar narrative starts with one. Taking the narrative device of beginning in medias res to the extreme, the novella begins with an ellipsis: “. . . and once, after Mahlke had learned to swim, we were lying in the grass, in the Schlagball field” (469) [. . . und einmal, als Mahlke schon schwimmen konnte, lagen wir neben dem Schlagballfeld im Gras (4:5)]. This same introductory ellipsis and phrase (and once/und einmal) also initiates four more episodes, all of which detail the achievements for which Mahlke is famous among his peers: his submarine trophy-hunting, his frighteningly long dives into the shipwreck, his discovery of its dry radio cabin, and his (asserted) liaison with Tulla Pokriefke (474, 476, 501, 545). These ellipses seem to function very differently from those in the conversations of the past-tense narrative. There, ellipses at the ends of phrases mark monolithic discourse that the audience, whether composed of schoolboys, newspaper readers, or worshippers, can complete by rote. Here, in the narrative discourse of Pilenz’s present, they begin sentences and the stories they tell. I maintain, however, that their symmetrical usage exposes Pilenz’s postwar narrative as belonging to the same cycle of repetition that plagued National Socialist society. They are a typographical sign that the language of the past persists, inhibiting Pilenz’s critical break with a supposedly discarded moral framework and language.

This continuity contrasts with Pilenz’s conscious treatment of the language of the past. The highly stylized fused phrases of Klohse’s speeches suggest that Pilenz himself marks this language as foreign rhetoric. He explicitly says that he is writing his story, so the narrative audience within the fictional world sees the typographically highlighted fused phrases, just as the authorial


58. Cf. Hasselbach, Katz und Maus, 106–7, who attributes the marking to a higher-order narrator. This attribution seems to stem solely from her general disregard for Pilenz’s intelligence and insight, since she offers no textual grounds for it.
audience does. Pilenz uses this blatant stylization to distance himself from the rhetoric of his youth; the illocutionary force is one of parody, and the ideal narrative audience is to recognize that. His conscious treatment of language thus parallels postwar authors’ rejection of a linguistic and literary tradition polluted by National Socialism,\(^59\) suggesting that he has undergone the “change of perspective” or critical break essential to the reinterpretation of history that takes place in \textit{Vergangenheitsbewältigung}.\(^60\) In contrast, his use of ellipses in the time of narration allows the implied author to show that, despite his conscious effort to break with the past, Pilenz unconsciously replicates its language and forms. Again, the narrative audience sees these ellipses. But Pilenz’s introductory ellipses seem to designate something different than do those associated with ritualized rhetoric in his story about the past—his own mental processes, perhaps. There are no suggestions that he perceives the symmetry of the two types. Nor would his ideal narrative audience, the postwar Germans who themselves lean comfortably on a conditioned rejection of National Socialism without recognizing the similar, rote quality of wartime and postwar rhetoric. Ann Mason mentions in passing that Pilenz’s “formulaic repetition of his ‘litanies’ but serves to recall him again and again to the unresolved sources of his guilt,” and argues that they illustrate art’s inability to serve a redemptive function.\(^61\) The ritualized language in Pilenz’s present-day narrative discourse does more than depict him as ensnared in old fascinations and antipathies, however, and does less than declare the impossibility of using writing and narration to come to terms with the past (although it does highlight the difficulty of the undertaking). It demonstrates the degree to which his current existence, cognition, and language continue to be structured by the same patterns that guided his youth. Furthermore, it allows him to avoid the self-examination that might bring him to acknowledge its continuing influence over his narrative—and the guilt that narrative at once obscures and emphasizes. Pilenz, the proclaimed postlitany writer, proves to be in thrall to the rhythms and mechanisms of the language from which he has declared his independence.

The introductory ellipses do not elicit a rehearsed conclusion. Nor, as John Reddick contends, do they “point back as it were into empty space.”\(^62\) Instead, they indicate that what precedes a statement may be as predictable as what

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\(^{59}\) For readings that view Grass’s employment of the form of the novella similarly, as a subversive critique of its tradition and ideology, see Durzak, “Entzauberung des Helden,” 28; Frank Richter, \textit{Die zerschlagene Wirklichkeit}.

\(^{60}\) Wertgen, \textit{Vergangenheitsbewältigung} 108–10.

\(^{61}\) Ann Mason, \textit{Skeptical Muse}, 64.

\(^{62}\) Reddick, “Danzig Trilogy,” 89.
follows it. In Pilenz’s case, stories about Mahlke follow other stories about Mahlke as if on an endless, looping reel. In one of few passages alluding to his postwar life, Pilenz reveals that he sits with Pater Alban night after night, debating theology and relating stories of Mahlke’s life. The list that describes his recollections suggests that these anecdotes proliferate uncontrollably, as Pilenz talks about Mahlke and Mahlke’s Virgin, Mahlke’s neck and Mahlke’s aunt, Mahlke’s sugar water, the part in the middle of his hair, his phonograph, snowy owl, screwdriver, woolen pompoms, luminous buttons, about cat and mouse and *mea culpa*. I tell him how the Great Mahlke sat on the barge and I, taking my time, swam out to him alternating between breast stroke and back stroke. (517)

Pilenz wants to “write himself free” of Mahlke, but his effort is in vain. In some of the most often cited lines of the text, Pilenz laments the impossibility of ever writing a conclusive story: “Are there stories that can [end]?” (534) [Gibt es Geschichten, die aufhören können? (4:113)]. By the end of his tale, he knows that he, at least, is incapable of finishing them. “Who will supply me with a good conclusion?” (556) [Wer schreibt mir einen guten Schluß? (4:150)], he asks, as if to seek aid from the reader or the hauntingly empty air.

Pilenz is trapped in an unending recitation of the story of Mahlke’s life. The ritualized introductory phrase “. . . and one time” [. . . und einmal] exposes the degree to which he condemns himself to this repetition by unwittingly adhering to the language and perspective of his youth; the phrase marks Pilenz’s adult narration as a continuation of the litany of Mahlke’s exploits that Pilenz and his friends had established during Mahlke’s lifetime. Two scenes demonstrate the role this litany plays in defining the boys’ relationship to the simultaneously admired and ridiculed outsider. In the first, Pilenz and another boy launch into a recitation of Mahlke’s summertime achievements in a clumsy attempt to impress Pilenz’s visiting girl cousins. Pilenz’s representation of this recitation, much like his account of Klohse’s auditorium speech, omits connective words and strings together key terms that evoke the whole:
“Metal plates, absolutely, and a fire extinguisher, and tin cans, he opened them right up and guess what was in them—human flesh! And when he brought up the phonograph something came crawling out of it, and one time he . . .” (492)

“Schildchen hat er, na und den Feuerlöscher, Konserven, sag ich Euch, gleich mit nem Büchsenöffner, war Menschenfleisch drinnen, und aus dem Grammophon, als er’s oben hatte, kroch was, und einmal hat er . . .” (4:44)

The final “and one time, he . . .” [und einmal hat er . . .], which echoes Pilenz’s adult use of the phrase, gestures toward the next rehearsed adventure story just as Klohse’s incomplete statements point to the next propagandistic phrase or the priest Father Gusewski’s to the next line of the mass. Similarly, when Pilenz and his classmates brag at their first military barracks about their acquaintance with Mahlke, they recite a catalogue of his deeds that includes three items that conclude with ellipses (538). The last of these initiates the story of the day at the athletic field and the drama of cat and mouse, closing the circuit that begins with the novella’s opening ellipsis.

The ellipses thus mark the story of Mahlke’s life as an endlessly repeated litany. By appearing in Pilenz’s accounts of Mahlke on both narrative levels—in Pilenz’s narrating present and in the story he tells about the past—these ellipses expose the similarities in Pilenz’s assessment of and relationship to “the Great Mahlke” across the great divide of the war’s end. Neither Pilenz’s fundamental relationship to Mahlke nor the language he uses to describe it has changed. The old language and moral framework act as “an unconscious corset on the capacity for conscious interpretation.”³⁶ Old language can, of course, be put to new use,³⁴ as Pilenz’s parodic use of the fused phrases shows. In this novella, however, Grass creates a narrator who fails to confess his old guilt in part because he speaks a “new” language that resembles the “old” one. His ostentatious apostrophe to Mahlke betrays this continuity, too. Mahlke’s beloved apostrophic prayer, the Stabat dolorosa, indicates his search for salvation in an external instance—with the prayer, in the Virgin Mary, but as a heroic military recruit, from far less admirable sources. As it echoes this prayerful apostrophe, Pilenz’s postwar address to Mahlke suggests the same kind of reliance on external salvation. Rather than assuming responsibility for his wartime sins and his postwar condition, he continues to seek

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³⁶. Wertgen, Vergangenheitsbewältigung, 101, 55.
³⁴. On language’s openness to resignification, see Butler, Excitable Speech; Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination, 280–82.
absolution from without.65 Pilenz’s ritualistic language inhibits the development of the new interpretive framework (or, to use Searle’s terminology, psychological state) that would allow him to confess successfully. Although Pilenz’s perlocutionary object as he parodies litany is to establish his distance from the past, the perlocutionary effect is the reader’s conviction that he remains entrapped in it. Language here is not a resource for future development but an anachronistic burden.

Litany in Grass’s Fictional(ized) Danzig Writings

The novella shows confession and a reckoning with the past foundering on old language and an avoidance of self-examination. To be more specific, the implied author reveals the narrator’s failure by exposing the continuities between his past and present language and obsession with Mahlke. In the last section of the chapter, I argue that Grass portrays ritualized language and other-focused narration similarly in three other major fictional and non-fictional works dealing with the past and with Danzig, the city of his childhood: Crabwalk, Writing, and Peeling the Onion.66 Although I do not conflate Grass with his implied authors, I argue that this persistent concern with the speech acts of ritualized language and other-focused narration has signaled his self-reflexive literary processing of his own guilt and shame over decades. My intent here is not so much to make an argument about the biographical Grass as it is to examine his ongoing (biographically relevant) reflections on and literary stylization of narrative as a means of reckoning with the past. In this goal, my project resembles recent efforts to reconstruct Grass’s development of and reflections on his authorial persona in both literary and nonliterary spheres.67

The narrator of Crabwalk, Paul Pokriefke, tells the intertwined stories of his mother, Tulla, and his son, Konrad. Grandmother and grandson share an obsession with the ship named after the German nationalist Wilhelm Gustloff and with its sinking at the end of World War II, as it carried refugees (and troops) westward from Danzig. This obsession culminates in Konrad’s

65. Kacandes reads Pilenz’s efforts at an apostrophic resurrection of Mahlke as an effort to obtain salvation from him. Talk Fiction, 166–70.

66. English quotations from Crabwalk refer to the translation by Krishna Winston, unless otherwise noted. German citations refer to Im Krebsgang in Grass, Werke, 10:5–205. As many have noted, the autobiography is often highly fictionalized. See Ahlberg, “Grass as Literary Intellectual,” 217; Rebecca Braun, “Ethics of Autobiography”; Fuchs, “Autobiographical Confession.”

67. See Rebecca Braun, Constructing Authorship; Pietsch, “Wer hört noch zu?”
murder of another youth. The book’s interwoven narratives emphasize the conflicts between the three family members’ interpretations of the Gustloff story, producing what Anne Fuchs terms a “memory contest”: “memory contests edit and advance competing narratives of identity with reference to an historical event perceived as a massive disturbance of a group’s self-image.”

The core of the dynamic observer narrative appears clearly in this definition, and, not coincidentally, all three of Fuchs’s literary examples are also dynamic observer narratives (the other two are Monika Maron’s Pavel’s Letters [Pawels Briefe] and Uwe Timm’s In My Brother’s Shadow [Am Beispiel meines Bruders]). While Fuchs identifies features of post-1989 German memory contests that are not common to all dynamic observer narratives, then, the memory contest phenomenon should be viewed within the tradition of the dynamic observer narrative.

Paul writes on behalf of a figure he calls “the old man” [der Alte], who has charged him with defusing the incendiary potential of the story of the Wilhelm Gustloff and its legacy. The old man has recognized, too late, the consequences of leaving the topic of German wartime suffering to the political right:

> Never, he said, should his generation have kept silent about such misery, merely because its own sense of guilt was so overwhelming, merely because for years the need to accept responsibility and show remorse took precedence, with the result that they abandoned the topic to the right wing. This failure, he says, was staggering . . . (103)

Niemals, sagt er, hätte man über so viel Leid, nur weil die eigene Schuld übermächtig und bekennende Reue in all den Jahren vordringlich gewesen sei, schweigen, das gemiedene Thema den Rechtsgestrickten überlassen dürfen. Diese Versäumnis sei bodenlos . . . (10:93)

In constructing his account, Paul uses the same sources Konrad had used for his propagandistic version, but he refuses the rhetoric of conspiracy and victimization that suffuses his son’s tale, instead representing the event from multiple perspectives and resisting a focus on the suffering it caused. His

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68. Fuchs, “Generational Memory Contests,” 179. See also Twark, “Landscape, Seascape, Cyberscape,” 147–49; Schmitz, On Their Own Terms, 270–73.

69. Note that Fuchs’s examples of memory contests include both fictional and nonfictional texts, as I see dynamic observer narratives as appearing in both realms.

70. See also Dye, “Günter Grass’s Im Krebsgang,” 481; Hall, “Danzig Quintet,” 173, 78–79; Schmitz, On Their Own Terms, 269.
narrative rebels against the litanies of German victimhood that are epitomized by his mother’s eternal reminiscences of her experiences aboard the ship; she and her parents had been among the refugees trying to escape when the ship sank, and Paul’s birth was brought on by the trauma of the experience. Throughout the text, her recitations of the details of the disaster almost inevitably end with the ellipsis of familiar rhetoric (28, 58, 95, 140, 223).

The novella suggests, however, that the complaints of those who militantly proclaim the unending guilt of the German people are no better. Konrad murders a boy whose online persona is a Jewish youth named David after the two argue in an Internet chatroom. In a striking passage, Paul reproduces snatches of David’s direct discourse alongside direct speech from Hitler and Tulla. David baits Konrad with an elliptical phrase: “You Germans will forever be branded with Auschwitz as a sign of your guilt…” [Euch Deutschen wird Auschwitz als Zeichen der Schuld ewiglich eingebrannt sein... (10:111)]. Konrad informs David that Hitler’s last speech was broadcast on the Gustloff, and, confirming this statement, Paul cites the speech: “Twelve years ago, on 30 January 1933, [...] Providence placed the destiny of the German Volk in my hands...” (126) [Heute vor zwölf Jahren [...] hat mir die Vorsehung das Schicksal des deutschen Volkes in die Hand gelegt... (10:112)]. Finally, Paul records his mother’s recollection of the broadcast: “It sure gave me the creeps when the Führer went on that way about destiny and stuff like that...” (126) [Richtich jegrault hab ech miä, als der Fiehrer vom Schicksal ond ähnliche Sachen jeredet hat... (10:112)]. The radical right and those who shirk responsibility for the events of World War II do not have a monopoly on ritualized language; the “anti-fascist prayer wheel” (142) [antifaschistische Gebetsmühle (10:127)] of the other side is just as predictable.72

Ritualistic language is dangerous here, as is an avoidance of personal guilt and self-reflection. Paul harbors a feeling of responsibility for his son’s corruption and crime. Visiting Konrad in jail and seeing the model Gustloff he has just finished assembling, Paul asks himself whether he could have prevented Konrad’s obsession by buying, building, and discussing the model ship with him earlier. Yet, even as he recounts the ship’s history, Paul resists associating himself with the distasteful story, just as he has sought to distance himself from the calamity throughout his entire life (29, 40, 71–72, 122, 148). Indeed, although he provides much more information about himself than

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71. My translation.

72. Others have pointed out that Grass indicts German memory practices of all political stripes as inadequate. Thesz, “Against a New Era,” 298–301; Ó Dochartaigh, “Memory Contest without Jews.”; Schmitz, On Their Own Terms, 280.
Pilenz does, Paul’s story of Tulla and Konrad’s obsession with the Wilhelm Gustloff still presents the family history as hinging on others’ stories, rather than his own. In particular, while his reflections on the signs of Konrad’s obsession and his own failings as a father betray that he, like Pilenz, feels guilt about past events (75, 91–92, 161, 197–98, 208), he insists again and again that his mother is responsible for Konrad’s crime: “It’s her fault and hers alone that things went so wrong with the boy” (69) [Sie, nur sie ist schuld, daß es mit dem Jungen danebenging (10:64)]. Although Paul acknowledges and reflects on his guilt much more openly than Pilenz does, he, too, deflects attention from it by pointing to someone else.

Paul tells his family’s story to break their cycle of rhetoric, but the novella’s last lines explicitly assert the impossibility of reaching a qualitatively different future as long as formulaic language reigns. His son in jail, Paul finds an Internet site dedicated to the prisoner. “‘We believe in you,’ the site proclaims, ‘we will wait for you . . .’ andsoon [sic] andsoforth” (234) [“Wir glauben an Dich . . . wir warten auf Dich, wir folgen Dir . . .” Undsoweiter undsoweiter (10:205)]. In response to this fanatical devotion, expressed in the now familiar combination of ellipsis-completed and fused phrases, the narrator expresses his fatalistic assessment of the situation: “It doesn’t end. Never will it end” (234) [Das hört nicht auf. Nie hört das auf (10:205)]. So ends the book.

Similar conventions pervade Grass’s critical and autobiographical prose, often with similar intent. In Writing Grass uses ellipses to present the “articles of faith” [Glaubenssätze] that penetrated all of German society during National Socialism: “We Germans are . . . being German means . . . and finally: A German would never . . .” [Wir Deutschen sind . . . Deutschsein heißt . . . und schließlich: Niemals würde ein Deutscher . . . (12:239)]. For Grass, this last item, the denial of the possibility of the Holocaust, survived the war and the collapse of Hitler’s regime (Writing 12:240). Likewise, in Peeling the Onion, ellipses mark the incorrigible litanies of the unreformed Nazis who were Grass’s coworkers in the postwar period; they stubbornly hum “Raise the flag . . .” [Die Fahne hoch . . .], the first line of the National Socialist Party’s official hymn, and warn, “If the Führer were alive today, he would [verb missing] the lot of you . . .” (226) [wenn der Führer noch leben würd, würd er euch alle . . . (10:433)]. Here, too, Grass highlights the durability of

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73. Ellipses do not always denote litany-like recitations. They can, for instance, mark a drifting off in the face of uncertainty (Crabwalk 75), regret (Crabwalk 80, 103), or old memories (Peeling 3–4). Stuart Taberner contends in “‘Political’ Private Biography” that in Die Box (2010), ellipses signal true gaps that leave the “authentic,” private self unspoken (507).

74. The title of the song is the “Horst-Wessel-Lied.” Heim supplies the verb that the ellipses in the original elide.
ritualized language and its ability to shore up moral frameworks across social and political breaks that would seem to require their abandonment.

Like Crabwalk, the autobiography also acknowledges that all worldviews have their ritualized language. There are litanies of postwar regrets and protestations of innocence (18, 29), litanies of parents’ hopes for and admonishments of their children (68, 243), litanies from Grass’s Danzig relatives about the plight of German refugees (236), litanies of Marxist ideology from East German tour guides and of false promises from West German publishers (322, 412), and litanies of freedom in the occupying Americans’ imported music: “Don’t fence me in . . .” (270). In addition to the many elliptical phrases, Grass employs a fused phrase to represent the single act of true resistance he witnessed during the war. Day after day, a young man in his military training camp refused to so much as touch a gun, always uttering the same phrase: “Four words fusing into one: Wedontdothat” (86) [Vier Wörter schnurrte zusammen, wurden zu einem: Wirtunsowsasnicht (10:294)]. This formulaic phrase thus becomes a mode of unflagging counter-litany and a (speech) act of resistance, and Grass reports that “his unvarying reply became a catchword that has never left me” (86) [seine nie variierte Antwort geriet zur Redensart und ist mir fur alle Zeit zitierbar geblieben (10:293)]. In two passages, the figure of the young Grass even utters recurrent litanies himself. He echoes the Latin of the Catholic mass from Cat and Mouse, “Introibo ad altare Dei . . .,” and Grass the narrator remarks that he still knows the prayers after decades of nonbelief (60). Grass also tells of how his mother listened to “the litany of my boasts, that would open with ‘When I’m rich and famous, I’ll [verb missing] with you . . .’” (48) [die litaneihaft so begannen, “Wenn ich mal reich und berühmt bin, werde ich mit dir . . .” (10:254)]. Grass figures himself and his contemporaries in the nonfictional world as entrapped, enamored, and empowered by ritualized language and the speech acts and stories it supports, much as his fictional figures are.

His play with the author function in Cat and Mouse and Crabwalk also shows extradiegetic figures very like himself as susceptible to the “the temptation to camouflage oneself in the third person” (Peeling the Onion 1) [Versuchung, sich in dritter Person zu verkappen (10:209)]. That is, he emphasizes storytellers’ propensity to tell someone else’s story to avoid their own. The figure whom Paul refers to as “the old man” or “my employer” [mein Arbeit-

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75. The English translation omits the ellipses in the promises.
76. Heinis translation supplies the missing verb.
geber] is a much more concrete character than the invisible instance to which Pilenz occasionally alludes, but in both cases shadowy figures push the narrators to write, who then insist they are writing about others. Pilenz alludes to this figure only briefly, saying that he “must write” because “over and over again the fellow who invented us because it’s his business to invent people obliges me to take your Adam’s apple in my hand” (469) [der uns erfand, von berufswegen, zwingt mich, wieder und wieder Deinen Adamsapfel in die Hand zu nehmen (4:6)]. He is male, perhaps an author, and Pilenz seems to have difficulty separating himself entirely from him: “If only I knew who made up the story, he or I, or who is writing this in the first place!” (528) [wenn ich nur wüßte, wer die Mär erfunden hat, er oder ich oder wer schreibt hier? (4:105)]. Crabwalk provides a fuller picture of “the old man” who guides Paul’s writing process, practically obliging the reader to equate him with Grass. Paul is to write in his place, to compensate for the old man’s failure to tell the story (103–4). Paul’s “employer” explains that he ought to have told this story himself because “properly speaking, any strand of the plot having to do directly or loosely with the city of Danzig and its environs should be his concern” (79) [eigentlich müsse jeder Handlungsstrang, der mit der Stadt Danzig und deren Umgebung verknüpft oder locker verbunden sei, seine Sache sein (10:73)]. The older man should have taken up the further story of Tulla and her family immediately: “Soon after the publication of that mighty tome, Dog Years, this material had been dumped at his feet. He—who else?—should have been the one to dig through it” (79) [Gleich nach Erscheinien des Wälzers Hundejahre sei ihm diese Stoffmasse auferlegt worden. Er—wer sonst—hätte sie abtragen müssen (10:73)]. But the author of Dog Years (Grass) failed to do so, for he admits “that around the mid-sixties, he’d had it with the past [. . .] . . . Now it was too late for him” (80) [daß er gegen Mitte der sechziger Jahre die Vergangenheit sattgebath habe [. . .] . . . Nun sei es zu spät für ihn (10:73)].

Paul’s suggestion that Tulla forces “the old man” to force Paul to write might be seen as reducing the Grassian character to a mere figure in a playful interpenetration of factual and fictional worlds (104). But Grass portrays himself as a real counterpart to his fictional narrators in less ambiguous contexts, as well. In Writing he explains his temporary retreat from prose writing after the completion of Dog Years in terms that associate him not only with the extradiegetic figure from Crabwalk, but also with his narrators: “Not that I was exhausted, but I believed too hastily that I had written myself free of something that now lay behind me, not erased, of course, but at least brought to an end” [Nicht daß ich erschöpft war, doch glaubte ich voreilig, mich von etwas freigeschrieben zu haben, das nun hinter mir zu liegen
hatte, zwar nicht abgetan, aber doch zu Ende gebracht (12:254)]. Like Pilenz, he has told others’ stories in an attempt to “write himself free.” For Grass as for his fictional characters, however, it is a delusion to believe that he could attain freedom from the past by narrating another’s story. “It is certainly the case that I believed I had done enough with what I had written” [Es ist sicher so, daß ich glaubte, mit dem, was ich schreibend tat, genug getan zu haben], Grass explained in his August 2006 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung interview.78 But over time, this belief that telling others’ fictional stories was “enough” faded. These stories could not compensate for his failure to tell his own; a successful confession demands speaking of one’s own past actions: “That oppressed me. My silence through all the years is one of the reasons I wrote the book. It had to come out, finally” [Das hat mich bedrückt. Mein Schweigen über all die Jahre zählt zu den Gründen, warum ich dieses Buch geschrieben habe. Das mußte raus, endlich].79

Perhaps Grass’s literary career has been a long, spiraling recitation of a litany of the other, a litany that for decades allowed him to ignore and bury the story of his own past. Perhaps his flesh-and-blood readers, accepting and affirming this litany, served as real-world counterparts to the ideal narrative audiences of his fictional narrators. His fiction permitted him to externalize his own guilt, or, in the Mitscherlichs’ words, served “the alienation [Verfremdung] of one’s own past.”80 Commenting on Grass’s long silence about his history with the Waffen-SS, Arno Widmann, too, notes his dissociation from his own past: “Like most, [. . .] he was able to make the leap into the new world of democracy only by separating himself from himself. He jumped out of his skin in the hope of escaping himself.”81 With his confession, Grass appears not exceptional but representative, “like most.” Indeed, Stuart Taberner argues that Grass uses his autobiography to present himself as exemplary, in both senses of the word: both in his representative German experience, and in his emulation-worthy means of addressing it.82 Nor is Taberner alone in thinking that because the (fictionalized) autobiography continues to render the abiding difficulty of dealing with Germany’s National Socialist history, its “baroque litany of guilt and shameful feelings” may still qualify as “great German literature.”83

78. Schirrmacher and Spiegel, “Eine deutsche Jugend.”
79. Ibid. In “Autobiographical Confession,” Fuchs also writes of Grass’s autobiographical confession as a speech act that he felt compelled to complete.
82. Taberner, “Private Failings.”
83. Vogel, “Literaturskandale,” 35. Rebecca Braun reads the autobiography as “perhaps Grass’s greatest ethical achievement yet” because it undermines the idea that one can provide a
However, my purpose in the end is not to weigh in on Grass’s worthiness as a person, or as a political or public figure, or even as a politically engaged author—an undertaking that has been complicated yet again by his controversial “poem” condemning Israel’s nuclear policy.  

Rather, I contend that the continuities in his fictional and nonfictional writing over time indicate an ongoing engagement with the poetics of the relationship between guilt and narrative. Through decades, his fiction has captured the modern dilemma of desiring and believing in the performative power of language and the narratives that use it, while simultaneously mistrusting them and being aware of their many modes of failure. It depicts the shadowy grip of habitual language, the teller’s eternal temptation to deflect attention from his faults and weaknesses by focusing attention on someone else, and the impossibility of telling a story that ends. And yet Grass’s writings continue to evince a great faith in—or, at the least, hope for—the power of stories to achieve great perlocutionary effects: to transform their tellers, affect their audiences, and change the world. Whatever else his controversial poem may do, it expresses this faith; as did his publication of Peeling the Onion; as did his Nobel Prize lecture, which held out hope for literature as the realm that might undermine the “new dogmatism” of capitalism. “Our common novel must be continued” [Schließlich muss unser aller Roman fortgesetzt werden], he writes. As the speech’s title insists, one thing is always predictable in human language and stories: they are “To Be Continued . . .” [Fortsetzung folgt . . .].

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single, truthful account of one’s self. “Ethics of Autobiography,” 1065–66. She thus reads Grass as rejecting a strongly narrativist paradigm.

84. Grass, “Was gesagt werden muss,” or, in English translation, “What Must Be Said.” The poem sparked a controversy in the media and the public sphere, and has been heavily criticized by academic audiences, as well, as in a panel titled “What Has to Be Said about Günter Grass” at the German Studies Association annual conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in October 2012.