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TELLERS AND EXPERIENCERS
IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES:
FOCALIZATION IN *PEELING THE ONION*
BY GÜNTER GRASS
AND *THE LIARS' CLUB* BY MARY KARR

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The opening sentence of Günter Grass's memoir *Peeling the Onion* has become a well-known example of an autobiographer's explicit distancing from a younger version of himself: "Today, as in years past, the temptation to camouflage oneself in the third person remains great: He was going on twelve, though he still loved sitting in his mother's lap, when such and such began and ended."¹ This sentence illustrates the narrator's two-sided relationship to his past self. On the one hand, the use of the pronoun *he* signals the narrator's detachment from the young subject. On the other hand, the narrator also acknowledges the inerasable identity shared between him and the boy as he regards the third person as a disguise, that is, a way of concealing, yet not cancelling, the connection between the two. This opening foreshadows a recurring theme in the entire narrative: the gap between the narrator and the protagonist, as perceived by the narrator. In narratological terms, such a gap in homodiegetic narratives corresponds to the distinction between the narrating I and the narrated, or experiencing, I. This split also raises the question of who perceives the depicted events – that is, the question of the narrative's point of view or focalization.

This article examines the narrative point of view in two autobiographical texts, pointing out the diverse effects the narratives achieve by means of different focalization strategies. After a short explication of the split between the narrator

¹ Günter Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Harvill Secker, 2007).

and the protagonist in life stories, I will look at focalization techniques in Günter Grass's *Peeling the Onion*, where the perception of the present self continuously interferes in the depiction of the past. The superior knowledge available to the narrator at the time of narration leads to an interpretation of the depicted events that the experiencing self could not provide. I will argue that although the book calls attention to the constructive nature of memory and narrative that necessarily affects retrospective accounts of the past, it also states its preference for the lens of the present by employing focalization through the narrating I.

I will subsequently juxtapose Grass's text and its narrative strategies with *The Liars' Club*, a childhood memoir by American author Mary Karr, and demonstrate how this narrative attains its realistic effect by engaging the child protagonist as the predominant focalizer. By shifting focalization between the narrating I and the experiencing I, involving either the suspension or application of the narrator's current knowledge, Karr manipulates readers' engagement with the narrative, such as their empathy and moral judgement. Furthermore, the text communicates a sense of identity and continuity between the experiencer and the teller, which stands in sharp contrast to the emphasis Grass's narrative puts on the distance between these two positions. Finally, I will briefly address the challenges presented by recent conceptions of identity construction to the distinction between the narrating I and the experiencing I, suggesting that these narratological concepts retain their relevance to discussions of autobiographical texts as literary works rather than stages of self-creation.

1. To judge him as a stranger: Dominance of the teller position in *Peeling the Onion*

In *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*² (*Peeling the Onion*), Grass presents memories of his childhood and youth up to the publication of the novel that brought him fame, *Die Blechtrommel* (1959; *The Tin Drum*). However, this memoir³ both deviates from and challenges traditional autobiographical writing in numerous ways – perhaps most conspicuously in its use of narrative strategies. The narrator

² Günter Grass, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006). Translated by Michael Henry Heim as *Peeling the Onion* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007).

³ Although the narrative is not strictly factual and the Lejeunian contract it offers its readers is not unambiguously autobiographical, I nevertheless prefer to describe it as a memoir rather than a novel. Not only is the German word *Roman*, which is usually included in the subtitles of novels published in the German-speaking world, missing from the title, but more importantly, I am convinced that reading the book as a work of fiction would reduce both its aesthetic value and its pertinence to human concerns. On the other hand, I will refer to the narrating instance as *narrator* rather than *author*, thus acknowledging the literary character of the memoir and the self-stylization of the extratextual author into the intratextual narrating entity. I will however use the author's name to discuss the overall strategy of the text and the effects it achieves.

occasionally switches into the third person or refers to the young protagonist as an entity separate from himself, calling him “the boy who answers to my name” or “the young man bearing my name.”⁴ The use of the third person underlines the self-reflective nature of the whole text, as do the frequent meta-autobiographical comments on memory and other problems related to narrating one’s life. It also highlights the distinction between the teller and the experiencer, that is, between the narrator and the protagonist of the story.

Importantly, this opposition is not reserved for literary texts only, but also appears in the life stories people tell themselves and others – stories that form the base of their self-understanding and sense of identity.⁵ In her sociolinguistic study of life stories, Charlotte Linde points out that this split enables self-reflection by allowing “the narrator to stand apart from and comment on the actions of the protagonist.”⁶ In other words, the narrating I views the experiencing I as if from the outside – “as an object or as an other.”⁷ In Grass’s memoir, the external view of oneself becomes even more pronounced when the narrator refers to his past self as “the son,” hence imitating his parents’ viewpoint.⁸ In life stories, the objectification of the past self also facilitates a positive evaluation of oneself at present, as past mistakes can be attributed to the protagonist of the life story rather than its teller.⁹ The narrating self disassociates itself from the experiencing self and criticizes it as an “other,” thus flaunting the narrator’s current wisdom or standards of morality.

In accordance with these insights, the narrator of *Peeling the Onion* uses the third person to draw attention to the incongruity of the younger version of himself with his present self-concept, thus highlighting a feeling known to most autobiographers. However, of great significance here is the narrator’s awareness that a clean break from one’s past version is impossible. The continuity is symbolized by sharing the same name in the two examples above and by oscillating

⁴ Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 30 and 305, respectively.

⁵ I have written elsewhere in more detail about narrative identity and the properties of life stories, and their relevance to fictional and autobiographical texts. See Zuzana Fonioková, “Memory and Identity in Fiction and Autobiography: *Nelly’s Version* by Eva Fíges, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* by Mary McCarthy, and *Montauk* by Max Frisch,” in *Memory: Forgetting and Creating*, ed. Wojciech Owczarski, Zofia Ziemann, and Amanda Chalupa (Gdańsk: Gdańsk University Press, 2016), 223–234.

⁶ Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories. The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 123.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁸ See: “Zwangsläufig wird vom Sohn auch in dritter Person berichtet, da das erzählende Ich sich in eine Position hinein versetzt, die niemals die eigene war.” Sylvia Kokot, “Erinnerung und Perspektive in Variation in Günter Grass’ *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*,” *mauerschau* 1 (2009): 94.

⁹ Linde, *Life Stories. The Creation of Coherence*, 123–124; Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 95–96.

between first- and third-person pronouns elsewhere; the following remark expresses more explicitly the narrator's perception of his earlier self as both remote from and attached to him: "my I of that time may not be a complete and utter stranger, but it is lost and as distant as a distant relative."¹⁰ Therefore, in contrast to Sylvia Kokot, who talks of a "narrated he" in her analysis of the book,¹¹ I will continue using the term *experiencing I* even for cases when the narrator employs the pronoun *he*, taking the *I* in this term to denote a self rather than the specific grammatical form used in the text.

A particularly telling example of the narrator's recognition of the inseparability of the past from the present self arises when he identifies three phases in his life: a non-smoking phase, a roll-your-own cigarette phase, and a pipe-smoking phase. He describes the transition from being a cigarette smoker to a pipe smoker in the following manner: "Only after a doctor's admonition did **the fifty-year-old**, for whom rolling **his** own had become an obsession [...], give up the daily rolling and inhaling and [...] make the transition to the pipe, which to this day [is set] aside and allow[ed] to go out only when [**I am**] forming clay figures [...] and all ten fingers are satisfied."¹² Here the narrator uses the third person to express the distance he feels towards his earlier version, the cigarette smoker, but at the same time acknowledges the continuity between these versions as the cigarette smoker smoothly turns into the present self, that is, the pipe smoker referred to in the first person. Moreover, both versions share the same hands that need to be occupied – whether by rolling cigarettes, holding a pipe, or working with clay. The present self has not replaced the previous one; rather, the past self has transformed into the present self, not disappearing altogether but leaving traces that can still be detected.

This observation reflects Grass's notion of time, according to which the present always contains the past and is to a certain degree defined by it: "After is always before. What we call the present, this fleeting nownownow, is constantly overshadowed by a past now in such a way that the escape route known as the future can be marched to only in lead-soled shoes."¹³ The ways in which we experience the present are governed by "the past as remembered, reworked,

¹⁰ Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 162.

¹¹ Kokot, "Erinnerung und Perspektive," 93.

¹² Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 306 (my emphasis). I have changed Michael Henry Heim's translation because the transition from the third to the first person is lost in it. The original reads: "Erst als **der Fünfzigjährige**, dem das Zigarettdrehen zur Manie [...] geworden war, nach ärztlicher Ermahnung die Praxis des täglichen Drehens und Inhalierens von Selbstgedrehten aufgab, ging er [...] zur Pfeife über, die bis heutzutage nur dann zur Seite gelegt und erkaltet vergessen wird, wenn **ich** mit Tonerde Figuren [...] forme und alle zehn Finger zufrieden sind." Grass, *Beim Häuten*, 345 (my emphasis).

¹³ Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 144.

and unconsciously present” and hence are historically determined.¹⁴ This insight also bears relevance to the problem of identity: no matter how disconnected we feel from what we were in the past, we cannot dodge the fact that the past has fed into our present self-experience.

Therefore, even if “time lays layer upon layer”¹⁵ and thus obscures the past, making it difficult for us to access our earlier experience, our present concerns are always tinged by the past. In *Peeling the Onion*, the narrator’s predominant present preoccupation that originates in the past is his sense of guilt about his part in the Nazi atrocities, more specifically, his shame for following the crowd and never questioning the cause. This sense of guilt plays a crucial role in the narrator’s wish to distance himself from his younger self, to “judge him as I would a stranger to whose needs I am indifferent.”¹⁶ It also draws attention to an important aspect of the distance between the present and the past self, that is, the difference in knowledge: the split between the narrating I and the experiencing I is also one between the knowing I and the ignorant I. Remembering his fourteen-year-old self, the narrator concludes that “what he [i.e., the younger self] fails to see as disgraceful, that is, what makes him feel no shame, I, who am more than related to him, must somehow grapple with.”¹⁷ With his current knowledge, the narrator would have acted differently in the past.

As Hanna Meretoja suggests, *Peeling the Onion* thematizes “the tension between the experience of those on the spot, immersed in the course of events, and the perspective of those looking back at the past and retrospectively narrativizing the events.”¹⁸ The narrator could use his younger self’s lack of knowledge as a justification of his actions. Yet his awareness of the banality of evil, that is, when people blindly follow orders and never question the system, prevents this excuse from bringing him much relief: “True, [...] there was no mention of the war crimes that later came to light, but the ignorance I claim could not blind me to the fact that I had been incorporated into a system that had planned, organized, and carried out the extermination of millions of people.”¹⁹ The narrator refuses to join the ranks of those who “listed the mitigating circumstances that had blinded and misled them, feigning their own ignorance and vouching for one another’s”²⁰ and instead chooses to accept responsibility for his actions.

¹⁴ Hanna Meretoja, “An Inquiry into Historical Experience and Its Narration: The Case of Günter Grass,” *Spiel* 30, no. 1 (2011): 85; for an enlightening analysis of Grass’s conception of time and the representation of experience as historically determined in his works, see pp. 83–90.

¹⁵ Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

¹⁸ Meretoja, “An Inquiry into Historical Experience,” 83.

¹⁹ Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 111.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

This concern is imprinted in the memoir's poetics as well. Leaving aside the much-discussed motifs of onion and amber, which recur as metaphors of various ways of remembering the past and of the diverse effects the past has on us,²¹ I will focus on the narrative point of view. As mentioned above, the narrator seems to be tempted to excuse his past deeds by invoking his ignorance at that time.²² His decision to resist that temptation results in focalization often moving from the experiencing I to the narrating I, with the effect that reflection prevails over immediacy of action. Even if the reader might at times become absorbed in the story, before long this immersion will be broken as the narrative zooms out from the action to remind the reader of the circumstances of the narrative's present, for instance, by referring to the protagonist in the third person, contemplating the workings of human memory, or casting doubt on what has just been narrated or relating it to a work of fiction (whether by Grass or another author). Again and again, the narrative reminds us that the story and its protagonist are viewed from a distance of many years.

This viewpoint also means that the past is seen through the lens of the present and its knowledge. The narrator could have suspended this knowledge, fully adopting the perspective of his younger self and portraying an unknowing, well-meaning young man who "did nothing bad."²³ To put it differently, Grass tells us that he could have gone on the defence by employing internal focalization throughout the narrative and thus making the narrator's perspective coincide with the protagonist's.²⁴

Incidentally, Martin Walser's controversial novel with strong autobiographical undertones, *Ein springender Brunnen*, does depict the Nazi period from its young protagonist's perspective. The proclaimed aim of the book is to narrate the past as it was, not as a "product of the present" through the lens of current knowledge and biases.²⁵ Consequently, the narrative attempts to reconstruct the events as they were perceived by the main character (who shares numerous

²¹ See, e.g., Hamid Tafazoli, "Formen von Gedächtnis und Erinnerung in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* und *Die Box*," *The German Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (2012): 336–339, and Jan Tlustý, "On Unreliability of Memories: J. M. Coetzee's Autofictional Trilogy," in *Travelling Texts: J. M. Coetzee and Other Writers*, ed. Božena Kucala and Robert Kusek (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014): 233.

²² For example: "The onion might say timidly, [...] You were just a foolish boy, you did nothing bad." Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 56.

²³ Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 56.

²⁴ I am of course aware of the huge wave of criticism Grass was subjected to due to his late acknowledgement of having been a member of the Waffen-SS. As this article focuses on the memoir's poetics rather than its extratextual context, I refrain from commenting on this debate. Nevertheless, I hope to show that Grass's choice of particular narrative techniques enhances the book's pertinence as a commentary on dealing with the past, especially the past burdened by a specifically German guilt.

²⁵ Martin Walser, *Ein springender Brunnen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998).

features with Walser himself) at the time, rather than provide an interpretation of the past from the point of view of the present. This strategy results in the absence of any mention of the Holocaust in the novel, as the narrative is focalized through a child (who develops into a teenager as the plot progresses), who – as so many at the time did – fails to see the bigger picture. This lack of a present-day perspective has led many critics to condemn the book as ethically deficient: Walser has been accused of denying responsibility and of justifying the Germans' behaviour in the Nazi era.²⁶ The purpose of this brief comparison, though, is not to evaluate the ethics of Grass's and Walser's books or to praise one over the other, but rather to demonstrate that had Grass chosen a different narrative perspective in *Peeling the Onion*, the book and its effect on the reader would have been substantially different.

The split between the narrating I and the experiencing I in *Peeling the Onion* further symbolizes the inaccessibility of one's original experience, which is also discussed in many of the self-conscious asides. Not only are memories often inaccurate, but narrative distorts experience as well. The narrative rendering of a past event overlays the event itself, as Aleida Assmann explains: "The more often you narrate something, the less you remember the experience itself and the more you remember the words with which one has told it."²⁷ When we narrate, we are forced to be selective, and consequently we create a version of what happened rather than a full record.²⁸ The narrator of *Peeling the Onion* shows an awareness of this danger of conflating an experience itself with its narrated version and of "fall[ing] into self-sealing autobiographical traps"²⁹: "once experiences [...] blossom into stories, they take on a life of their own

²⁶ See Ursula Knapp, *Der Roman der fünfziger Jahre: Zur Entwicklung der Romanästhetik in Westdeutschland* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2002), 12, and Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, "Zum Stand und zu den Perspektiven der Autobiographieforschung in der Literaturwissenschaft," *BIOS – Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen* 23, no. 2 (2010): 197–198.

²⁷ Aleida Assmann, "Wie wahr sind unsere Erinnerungen?," in *Warum Menschen sich erinnern können. Fortschritte der interdisziplinären Gedächtnisforschung*, ed. Harald Welzer and Hans J. Markowitsch (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2006), 103 (my translation). The original reads, "Je öfter man etwas erzählt, desto weniger erinnert man sich an die Erfahrung selbst und desto mehr erinnert man sich an die Worte, mit denen man zuvor davon erzählt hat."

²⁸ Sharing an experience thus often fixes the incident in a specific shape. However, even without narrating, each time one retrieves a memory, this memory changes: "[W]hen we remember a past experience, it is encoded anew into the memory system. However, we may focus on or think about only certain aspects of the retrieved experience, thereby changing its subsequent memory representation." Daniel L. Schacter, "Memory Distortion: History and Current Status," in *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past*, ed. Daniel L. Schacter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 6.

²⁹ Jerome Bruner, "The Autobiographical Process," in *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*, ed. Robert Folkenflik (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 39.

and flaunt one detail or another.”³⁰ Putting the words down in writing might jeopardize the original experience even more, as a selected part of the memory “sounds plausible on paper, and vaunts details to be as precise as a photograph” but can in fact be planted by “Lie or her younger sister, Deception.”³¹ In this sense, the memoir concurs with contemporary research on autobiographical memory claiming the inaccessibility of the past, the interpretative and constructive dimension of remembering, and the inevitable bias of the present perspective.

However, the book also casts a different light on the apparent dichotomy of experience (pure, raw, authentic) and memory (processed, distorted, mere interpretation). The underlying assumption in accounts of memory’s unreliability is that the original experience at a given moment counts as “real,” while remembering the experience inevitably distorts it as the memory is defined by the rememberer’s current viewpoint and by cognitive structures that govern “what is extracted from an experience and determine how it is reconstructed.”³² By contrast, the psychologist Mark Freeman contests this “tendency to equate the immediate, the momentary, the sensuous present, with ‘reality’” and advocates the value of retrospective.³³ While he acknowledges the validity of considering the immediate present as one type of reality, he argues against assigning it priority significance and making it “the ‘baseline’ against which any and all other renditions are to be compared.”³⁴ By the same token, Freeman challenges the idea that looking back at an experience unavoidably distorts it and thus a memory is less truthful than the experience at present, points to the limits of the present moment, and accentuates the “*revelatory* power of hindsight – that is, its capacity to yield insight and understanding, indeed truth, of a sort that cannot occur in the immediacy of the present moment.”³⁵ Retrospection does not always generate an inferior version of the original incident; often it reveals aspects not noticed while immersed in living the experience and provides knowledge unavailable at the immediate moment.³⁶

Peeling the Onion seems to corroborate Freeman’s theory in that the depicted events and the part the protagonist plays in them patently show how hindsight can offer essential information missing at the time of experiencing. The narrator may struggle with remembering details of his experiences – much

³⁰ Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 172.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³² Schacter, “Memory Distortion,” 9.

³³ Mark Freeman, *Hindsight: The Promise and Peril of Looking Backward* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 171–172.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 173.

³⁶ Note that Freeman does not question the possibility of memory distortion, but the hypothesis of the inevitability of such distortion. See also Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1993), 52–53.

is forgotten, blurred, and uncertain. Nonetheless, in one crucial respect his current perspective yields a clearer picture of reality than immediate experience did: his knowledge of the real nature of the Nazi project defines his actions before and during the war as misguided instead of heroic. Unlike Walser in *Ein springender Brunnen*, Grass chooses the truth of hindsight over the reality of being caught in the moment in that his narrative looks at the past through the eyes of the narrating I rather than the experiencing self. The painful wisdom of today is superimposed on a blithe ignorance of the past.

To sum up, in *Peeling the Onion*, focalization through the narrating I rather than the experiencing I and the self-conscious reflection of using this perspective largely contribute to the book's powerfulness both as a work of art and as a commentary on the human condition.

2. Longing for the sweetness: Dominance of the experiencer position in *The Liars' Club*

At one point in *Peeling the Onion*, several versions of the narrator's self materialize in the narrative world at the same time.³⁷ This playful episode featuring obviously fictional³⁸ representations of the narrator (and, by proxy, the author) foregrounds the constructed nature of the autobiographical self and the notion that the autobiographical act is one of self-creation that does not merely reveal a pre-existing self but brings this self into existence.³⁹ If it is true, as Martin Löschnigg contends, that "autobiography [...] stages the drama of creating the autobiographer's identity,"⁴⁰ then Grass's self-reflective memoir highlights and comments on this feature of life writing by allowing the narrator to explicitly create his self at various stages of his life.

By contrast, in Mary Karr's bestselling memoir *The Liars' Club*⁴¹ the act of self-invention remains implicit as the narrative generates the impression that the author/narrator has direct access to her past self. The first two parts

³⁷ Grass, *Peeling the Onion*, 43.

³⁸ Grass's use of fictionality does not necessarily make the book a work of fiction. Rather, fictional elements are employed to express a nonfictional content, creating a situation that narrative theorists working on fictionality would describe as local fictionality appearing within a globally nonfictional narrative. See Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh, "Ten Theses about Fictionality," *Narrative* 23, no. 1 (2015): 67, and Phelan, "Local Fictionality within Global Nonfiction: Roz Chast's *Why Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*," *Enthymema* 16 (2016): 18–31.

³⁹ See Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 3; Bruner, "Autobiographical Process," 38.

⁴⁰ Martin Löschnigg, "Postclassical Narratology and the Theory of Autobiography," in *Post-classical Narratology*, ed. Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2010), 256.

⁴¹ Mary Karr, *The Liars' Club: A Memoir* (London: Picador, 1995).

(dated 1961 and 1963, respectively) reconstruct Karr's childhood in the 1960s, focusing primarily on the dramas resulting largely from her mother's emotional instability as well as on her affectionate bond with "Daddy," who is portrayed as a tough working-class man, yet a caring father and husband. The last, shortest part, dated 1980, sketchily presents Karr's life in her twenties, paying most attention to her developing relationships with both of her parents, her ageing father's life just before and after a stroke that leaves him bedridden and aphasic, and her mother's revelation of events that had caused her emotional instability and hence lie at the root of many of the incidents depicted in parts one and two.

The narratological analysis that follows focuses on the first two parts of Karr's memoir, which feature a child protagonist. When it comes to focalization, these two parts approach the exact opposite of *Peeling the Onion*. Most of the narrative is focalized internally through the experiencing I – the main character, whom I will call Mary (as opposed to Karr, the author, and her textual representation, the narrating I). The gap between the past and the present often closes – the vivid depiction, with frequent switches to the present tense, encourages readers to mentally relocate themselves into the world of the past and to disregard the present circumstances of the narrative. In some passages the teller assumes the experiencer's perspective to such an extent that both instances appear to merge; it is as if it were the child protagonist and not the grown-up narrator who is narrating.

The following extract pictures Mary, aged six or seven, after her father has told his friends (the "Liars' Club" of the book title) an invented story about his own father's death, pretending it to be the truth. The passage stages the child's fear that her mother might commit suicide, fear boosted by her recent experiences, such as finding her grandmother in a coma. Note how the use of present tense and internal focalization through the character combines with a detailed account of her state of mind to create an impression of unmediated representation of the moment:

What's rolling around in my head is all the dying and near dying I've run into lately. I can picture Grandma the way I found her all slack-jawed in the bed, then Lecia glassy-eyed on the sand. For a minute, I even think about Mother propped up in her bed night and day next to a tower of books [...]. Then it's her face slack-jawed I see in place of Grandma's, her arm hanging down that the ants are running on. I've plumb forgot where I am for an instant, which is how a good lie should take you. At the same time, I am more where I was inside myself than before Daddy started talking, which is how lies can tell you the truth. I am eye-level to the card table, sitting on an upended bait bucket, safe in my daddy's shadow, and yet in my head I'm finding my mother stretched out dead.⁴²

⁴² Ibid., 124.

In this passage the narrating I obliterates her own perspective and adopts the experiencing I's point of view. Consequently, the past self attains a degree of clarity that makes it almost tangibly present. As readers, as long as we suspend our disbelief we are there with Mary, immersed in her world and in her mental processes.⁴³ The Mary of this scene seems to be immediately real rather than a construct filtered through the interpretive and imaginative processes of memory and narrative.

Considering the autobiographical nature of the text, though, the improbable preciseness of this recollection (who can remember their thoughts at such an early age in such abundant detail, including the times and places?) indicates the adult narrator's (and author's) role as the agent behind this passage. Wishing to convey the recollected fears of her earlier self around that time, she (re)constructs them so that they fit smoothly into the narrative.⁴⁴ In the resulting scene, Mary's father's death-related tall tale has made her aware of her own death-related worries: "this is how lies can tell you the truth." Similarly, the presumably fabricated memory expresses the truth (or at least what the narrator believes to be the truth) about Mary's thoughts and feelings in the period following her grandmother's death. Moreover, just as the yarn her father spins makes Mary forget her whereabouts for a moment, "which is how a good lie should take you," the reader becomes engrossed in the intense scene and does not question its authenticity. Truth and fiction do not always stand in opposition to each other, and imagination can complement memory while remaining truthful to the autobiographer's view of her life.⁴⁵

On another occasion, the past feels like the present due to the way bodily sensations are narrated: "I watch Ben draw a cake pan of biscuits out of the oven. [...] I like to poke a hole in a biscuit with my thumb, then fill it with that syrup so it gushes out the sides when you bite down. I figure on doing that, which fills the back of my mouth with longing for the sweetness of it. I'm still holding that sweetness like a thirst when Daddy starts up."⁴⁶ Again, the perspective is wholly that of the experiencing self. The narrator gives up any distance from the protagonist as if she was reliving the experience instead of merely retelling it. Therefore, where Grass's intruding narrator views his younger self as an entity separate from

⁴³ In Karr's own words: "The reader gets zipped into your skin." Mary Karr, *The Art of Memoir* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 78.

⁴⁴ In her book on memoir writing, *The Art of Memoir*, Karr lists the types of deviations from strict factuality she allowed herself in her memoirs, including one that may also relate to the situation discussed here: "Stopping to describe something in the midst of a heated scene, when I probably didn't observe it consciously at that instant. This is perhaps the biggest lie I ever tell. I do so because I am constantly trying to re-create the carnal world as I lived it, so I keep concocting an experience for a reader." Karr, *The Art of Memoir*, 25.

⁴⁵ See Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 5–6.

⁴⁶ Karr, *Liars' Club*, 166.

himself, an object, Karr's narrating I perceives the earlier self as identical with herself, hence as a subject.⁴⁷ This difference leads to the contrast between the extreme reflexivity of *Peeling the Onion* and the realistic effect of *The Liars' Club*.

Another striking dissimilarity between the two books lies in how they work with the difference in knowledge between the present and past self. In contrast to Grass's memoir, Karr's narrating I often suspends her current knowledge and presents Mary's uninformed version of what happens. The dominance of the younger self's perspective is also inscribed in the structure of the whole narrative: the narrator presents numerous events marked by Mary's mother's psychological lability, withholding an explanation of this instability. The reader only gets to know this missing piece in the narrative at the end of the book, in part three, when the protagonist, now in her twenties, finds it out herself. Karr withholds this information so that the reader is left in the dark just like the experiencing I.

Presenting the story from a child's perspective can also increase the reader's empathy with the protagonist – and by extension with the narrator and author whose past is represented. *The Liars' Club* contains an especially conspicuous instance of such an empathy booster – a scene depicting the nine-year-old Mary as a victim of sexual abuse by an adult man. The child's torment is multiplied by her confusion as she does not understand what is happening and where the man's actions are heading. The description of forced fellatio – one uninformed by the grown-up narrator's knowledge – effectively conveys the child's distress: "Then for no reason, his hands clap down on the back of my head. All care and gentleness go out of him. I sense that even the voice has gone out of him. Which puzzles me, for I'm doing the best I can here. [...] Then, worst of all, something wet and warm spurts out of the dick itself. He's peeing in my mouth. I'm sure of it."⁴⁸ The present tense here further supports the experiencer's perspective in this passage – the narrating I fuses with the experiencing I, staging a victim's continuous reliving of a traumatic event – and contributes to the overwhelming effect this scene has on the reader. Furthermore, this narrative strategy enables Karr to present uncorrected interpretations of the whole incident: the child's self-blaming anxiety that she has somehow provoked or deserved this act of violence takes the place of explicit condemnation of the perpetrator. The portrayed anguish of such thoughts, however, directs the reader towards an even harsher judgement on the one who caused them.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Karr comments on reinhabiting her younger self through memories of sensory impressions (what she calls "carnality") in *The Art of Memoir*: "the sharpest memories often give me the spooky sense of looking out from former eyeholes at a landscape decades-since gone. The old self comes back." Karr, *The Art of Memoir*, 76.

⁴⁸ Karr, *Liars' Club*, 245–246.

⁴⁹ As Kate Douglas puts it, "Karr relies on the reader to provide a moral compass." Kate Douglas, *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 27.

One may object that the character of Mary is the narrator as well as the focalizer of this and other passages, since often not only the perspective but also the language reflects the child's position. Yet although the adult narrator's voice is at times "infected" by the voice of the character, it is not absent altogether. In the depiction of the sexual assault, for instance, the narrating I enters the narrative with the following comment: "I should also point out that there is something deeply familiar about a hard-on, even when the fundamental feeling coursing through you is that this is wrong wrong, and you are wrong wrong for having been selected for it."⁵⁰ Here the narrating I's perspective blends with the experiencing I's naïve perception in what James Phelan labels "dual-focalization": "the narrator's focalization contains the character's" as the mature narrator is perceiving her former self through the eyes of that self.⁵¹ While in the first part of this sentence the voice is clearly the narrating I's, in the second part it mingles with the experiencing I's voice in free indirect discourse ("this is wrong wrong, and you are wrong wrong"). Alterations in perspective like this one and numerous other explanations and retrospective reflections betray that the story is narrated by a teller separated from the experiencer by a gap in time and knowledge.⁵²

The significance of the split between narrator and protagonist in Karr's memoir becomes evident when we consider the representation of another instance when Mary fell victim to sexual abuse, at the age of seven – this time by a male teenager. Just as the sexual assault passage discussed above, this scene conveys Mary's helplessness at the time, yet by different means: the depiction, written in the past tense, is interspersed with commentary made from the grown-up narrator's present perspective, such as "I remember" or "I was seven and *a good ten years from anything like breasts. My school record says I weighed about fifty pounds.*"⁵³ The distance from which the narrating I perceives the event helps her communicate the sense of inappropriateness of the young man's act. In a crucial parenthetical aside the narrating I – representing the author – even addresses this man, announcing that the inclusion of the rape

⁵⁰ Karr, *Liars' Club*, 245.

⁵¹ James Phelan, "Why Narrators Can Be Focalizers – and Why It Matters," in *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, ed. Willie van Peer and Seymour Chatman (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 60; I have borrowed Phelan's formulation concerning his example from *Lolita*: "Humbert the narrator is perceiving the sobbing Lolita and his own former self – through the eyes of that self," *ibid.*

⁵² In this respect *The Liars' Club* differs from another dramatic-childhood memoir from the 1990s, namely Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996). This book is narrated by the young Frankie, whose character links both the narrating I and the experiencing I, and whose childish interpretation of events makes him an unreliable narrator. For a thorough explication, see James Phelan, *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 66–97.

⁵³ Karr, *Liars' Club*, 66 (my emphasis).

scene in the memoir amounts to her revenge. This paragraph underscores the damage caused by the man's deed, which is still painfully remembered after all those years. Even more importantly, this act of breaking the silence imposed on Mary by the circumstances of the time provides the victim with the opportunity to swap powerlessness for empowerment. Finally, despite employing a different focalization strategy than in the previously discussed passages, Karr again expresses a sense of continuity between the experiencer and the teller, not only by claiming the protagonist's experience as the narrator's, but also by mentioning "the long memory my daddy always said I had"⁵⁴ and thus connecting even more to the child she used to be – helpless in fights, strong in acts of delayed revenge. In mirroring the popular, folk conceptions of identity, this attitude further reinforces the realistic impression the memoir produces.

Before concluding, I will briefly return to the question of self-construction. Recent theories of autobiography insist that "[t]here is no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating."⁵⁵ This conception suggests that while the present self constructs the past self, the past self, in turn, creates the present self: autobiographers draw on memory and imagination to fashion earlier versions of themselves, but their understanding of that earlier self is constitutive of their present identity. The narrating I of *The Liars' Club* would be different had Karr not managed to reconstruct a repressed memory of her mother almost killing her and her sister – an incident that affects the experiencing self tremendously, and in *Peeling the Onion* the narrator's relationship to former manifestations of his self illustrates the impossibility of extracting the present self from its past versions.⁵⁶

Informed by these constructivist theories and by postclassical narratology, Löschnigg warns against applying the opposition between the narrating I and the experiencing I to autobiography, finding such application "prone to introduce a dichotomy which detracts from the continuity of (remembered) experience."⁵⁷ While I agree that distinguishing between the teller and the experiencer may prove counterproductive when examining autobiographical works in their real-world context and as documents of their authors' search for self-definition, I also believe that this distinction remains a useful tool for analysing life

⁵⁴ Ibid., 66.

⁵⁵ Sidonie Smith, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 108.

⁵⁶ For a short yet insightful examination of Karr's memoir in relation to identity construction, see Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 61–64, 78–79.

⁵⁷ Löschnigg, "Postclassical Narratology," 257.

narratives as literary works. Of course, not all life writing can and should be read as literature. I hope, however, that my discussion of Grass's and Karr's memoirs has demonstrated that the stylization and narrative composition of certain autobiographical works vindicates the narrator-character distinction as its application opens up new ways of reading the narratives and understanding their aesthetic dimension.

To recap, *Peeling the Onion* and *The Liars' Club* represent contrasting methods of portraying the past, methods that are closely linked to their focalization strategies. Grass predominantly applies the present-self perspective, thus stressing the narrator's distance from the protagonist, whereas Karr often diminishes this distance in that the narrating I adopts the perception of the experiencing self. The different effects these narrative techniques achieve – a high degree of self-reflection in Grass's case and a realistic effect in Karr's – considerably contribute to the overall outcomes: *Peeling the Onion* is a meta-autobiographic commentary on a writer's (and human being's) reconstruction of his own troubled past and *The Liars' Club* is a highly readable account of childhood that enables readers to identify with its protagonist and perhaps relate the story to their own childhood memories. In more general (and narratological) terms, the focalization techniques reflect an emphasis on discourse in *Peeling the Onion* and on story in *The Liars' Club*.

In no way do my examinations of the two memoirs pretend to be comprehensive readings of these books, just as this article comes nowhere near exhausting the possibilities of exploring the narrative perspective in life writing. One of the myriad fascinating routes to take would be to consider the perspective of an other that some experimental works of autobiography and autofiction embrace. In Grass's autofictional sequel to *Peeling the Onion*, *The Box* (2008), the (fictionalized) author's children meet to discuss their memories of their father, who appears in the narrative as an obtrusive narrator admitting to having invented the children's accounts. Other intriguing examples include Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), with its one chapter narrated from the perspective of an aunt from China experiencing cultural shock as she observes her Americanized nieces and nephews (including the main character representing the author), John Maxwell Coetzee's *Summertime* (2009), offering an indistinguishable mixture of fact and fiction from five different speakers remembering their experiences with the late "John Coetzee," Gertrude Stein's famous *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), and Czech author Bohumil Hrabal's trilogy *In-House Weddings* (1982–1985), featuring the narrating character of Hrabal's wife. Analysing the narrative strategies in these and other works that experiment with literary techniques while touching on the author's life could potentially yield insights valuable to both narratology and the theory of autobiography.

Summary

This article examines the narrative point of view in two autobiographical texts, pointing out the diverse effects the narratives achieve by means of different focalization strategies. After a short explication of the split between the narrator and protagonist in life stories, I look at focalization techniques in Günter Grass's *Peeling the Onion* (2006), where the perception of the present self continuously interferes in the depiction of the past. The superior knowledge available to the narrator at the time of narration leads to an interpretation of the depicted events that the experiencing self could not provide. I argue that although the book calls attention to the constructive nature of memory and narrative that necessarily affects retrospective accounts of the past, it also states its preference for the lens of the present by employing focalization through the narrating I. I subsequently contrast Grass's text and its narrative strategies with Mary Karr's childhood memoir *The Liars' Club* (1995) and demonstrate how this narrative attains its realistic effect by engaging the child protagonist as the predominant focalizer. By shifting focalization between the narrating I and the experiencing I, involving either the suspension or application of the narrator's current knowledge, Karr manipulates readers' engagement with the narrative, such as their empathy and moral judgement. Furthermore, the text communicates a sense of identity and continuity between the experiencer and the teller, which stands in sharp contrast to the emphasis Grass's narrative puts on the distance between these two positions. Finally, I briefly address the challenges presented by recent conceptions of identity construction to the distinction between the narrating I and the experiencing I, suggesting that these narratological concepts retain their relevance to discussions of autobiographical texts as literary works rather than stages of self-creation.

„JA” OPOWIADAJĄCE I „JA” PRZEŻYWAJĄCE
W NARRACJACH AUTOBIOGRAFICZNYCH
– FOKALIZACJA W *PRZY OBIERANIU CEBULI* GÜNTERA GRASSA
I *THE LIARS' CLUB* MARY KARR

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy punktu widzenia w dwóch tekstach autobiograficznych i zróżnicowanych efektów, jakie przynoszą różne strategie focalizacji. Po krótkim wprowadzeniu poświęconym różnicy między narratorem a bohaterem w narracjach o sobie przyglądam się technikom focalizacji w *Przy obieraniu cebuli* Güntera Grassa (2006); w opisywaniu przeszłości ciągle ingeruje tam obecne „ja”. Wiedza dostępna narratorowi w chwili opowiadania wpływa na interpretację wydarzeń z przeszłości, do której „ja” przeżywające nie miało dostępu. Mimo że książka stawia problem konstrukcyjnej natury pamięci i narracji, które zawsze wpływają na retrospektywne relacje o przeszłości, poprzez focalizację (perspektywę „ja” opowiadającego) zdaje się preferować terażniejszy punkt widzenia. Zestawiam książkę Grassa i zastosowane w niej strategie narracyjne z opartą na wspomnieniach z dzieciństwa książką *The Liars' Club [Klub kłamców]* Mary Karr (1995) i pokazuję, jak uczynienie focalizatorem dziecka przyczynia się do uzyskania efektu realności. Zmiany perspektywy (od „ja” opowiadającego do „ja” przeżywającego), wymagające uruchomienia lub zawieszenia aktualnej wiedzy narratora, sprawiają, że Karr wpływa na zaangażowanie czytelnika, jego empatię czy oceny moralne. Ponadto tekst buduje wrażenie tożsamości „ja” opowiadającego i „ja” przeżywającego – zupełnie inaczej niż książka Grassa, mocno je przeciwstawiająca. W końcowej części tekstu odnoszę się do współczesnych koncepcji tożsamości i zestawiam je z opozycją „ja” przeżywającego i „ja” opowiadającego. Uznaję, że używanie tych pojęć wymaga traktowania tekstów autobiograficznych jako tekstów literackich, a nie etapów konstruowania tożsamości.