



Aging and Old-Age Style in Günter Grass, Ruth Klüger, Christa Wolf, and Martin Walser

The Mannerism of a Late Period

Stuart Taberner

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Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

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Preface

REREADING GÜNTER GRASS'S *Die Blechtrommel* (The Tin Drum, 1959) a few years ago along with a group of students engaged on a module comparing this, Grass's hugely successful debut novel, with his 2006 memoir *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (Peeling the Onion), I was struck by several lines coming just after Oskar demonstrates his glass-breaking skills: "Aus bloßem Spieltrieb, dem Manierismus einer Spätepoch verfallend, dem L'art pour l'art ergeben, sang Oskar sich dem Glas ins Gefüge und wurde älter dabei" (Succumbing to the mannerism of a late period, a devotee of l'art pour l'art, out of pure playfulness, Oskar sang glass back to its original structure, and grew older as he did so).¹ As I looked back from somewhere close to the end of Grass's life (he was born in 1927), these words seemed to me to raise interesting questions about the way we routinely associate growing older with a mannerism of artistic and personal freedom from convention. These questions went beyond what Grass probably intended in *Die Blechtrommel*, but looking back from his own "late period," I wondered whether they might still offer a useful way into the author's "old-age writing" and perhaps even a way of rereading his earliest texts, including *Die Blechtrommel*. What relationship, if any, might there be between an artist's biological age and his or her "style"? Is mannerism the only (or at least most likely) "old-age style"? What does old-age style *do*, that is, to what end is it deployed, or perhaps performed? And what might be the connection between the individual writer's late period and a more generalized perception of a society's late period?

This book is an attempt to think through these questions with regard to the late work of Günter Grass, Ruth Klüger, Martin Walser, and Christa Wolf, four internationally renowned German-language writers born between 1927 and 1931, belonging to the last generation alive today to have experienced the traumatic events of the Second World War and the Holocaust. First, I wanted to know how these writers were casting back over their lives in what, inevitably, will be among their very last works. How might the two West German authors, Grass and Walser, both male and both pulled into Hitler's military machine toward the end of the war, shape their wartime and postwar experiences? How might Wolf, who opted for the Soviet zone and the GDR after 1945, define her experience as a committed socialist in a state that failed to live up to her ideals and as a woman who, before and after unification, was pilloried by the patriarchal apparatus in both East and West? And how would Klüger, an Austrian Jew who survived the camps and emigrated to the United States, look back over her life and style her life story?

But I also wanted to know whether old age does in fact bring an emancipation from convention. Might these eighty-plus-year-old writers feel liberated to resolve the biographical contradictions that infuse, even drive, their earlier work? (These contradictions will be familiar to readers who know the authors well; at any rate, I describe them in detail in later chapters.) And would this resolution be so willful, so self-assertive, that we can view it as mannerism? What implications would such mannerism have for the way we read these authors' literary "life reviews," and how could we integrate it with their earlier works?

Further to this, I wanted to know how, if at all, these authors' old-age style—the art-historical term applied to the older artist's liberation from convention—might relate to the broader discussion of "the aging society" that has become so significant in recent years not only in Germany but also across other Western countries. Just as we appear to sense a connection between old age and self-assertion, so do we seem to sense the relevance of the artist's presentation of his or her growing older not only for our own aging as individuals but also for the demographic aging that will crucially shape the future of the societies we inhabit. To be sure, in Germany and elsewhere demographic aging is frequently allied in the popular imagination with a pessimistic foreboding of the country's social, political, and economic decline, and indeed of the decline of the West more generally. (Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* [The Decline of The West, 1918 and 1922] is often invoked in the German debate.) I wondered, then, whether old-age style—the expression of the singular artist's growing-older—might also function as *late* style, that is, as an intervention in what Gordon McMullan calls the "epochal phenomenon" of society's lateness.² More specifically, might old-age style as late style intervene in the "new" lateness that, it seems to me, characterizes Germany's and other Western countries' "post-postwar" era?

In this book I aim to read literary texts within the literary-theoretical frameworks of old-age style and late style, while drawing on psychological and gerontological understandings of life review and the sociological discussion of "the aging society" in order to demonstrate their wider relevance. The literary expression of the intensely personal experience of growing old, I argue, is powerfully associated with, and indeed taken to intervene in, the far bigger debate that is currently raging about an aging Germany's self-understanding and place in the world.

Notes

¹ Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993), 87; in English, Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, trans. Breon Mitchell (London: Vintage Books, 2009), 60. All translations from novels by Grass, Klüger, Wolf, and Walser are my own unless otherwise indicated in the endnotes.

² Gordon McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 279.

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Leeds, April 2013

Introduction: Old-Age Societies— Old-Age Style

Ach, aber mit Versen ist so wenig getan, wenn man sie früh schreibt. Man sollte warten damit und Sinn und Süßigkeit sammeln ein ganzes Leben lang und ein langes womöglich, und dann, ganz zum Schluß, vielleicht könnte man dann zehn Zeilen schreiben, die gut sind.

[But alas, with poems one accomplishes so little when one writes them early. One should hold off and gather sense and sweetness a whole life long, a long life if possible, and then, right at the end, one could perhaps write ten lines that are good.]

—Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*¹

IN THEIR LANDMARK REPORT ahead of the 2002 “World Assembly on Ageing,” researchers from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs at the United Nations began by placing the contemporary graying of the world’s population in its historical perspective:

Population ageing is unprecedented, without parallel in the history of humanity. Increases in the proportions of older persons (60 years or older) are being accompanied by declines in the proportions of the young (under age 15). By 2050, the number of older persons in the world will exceed the number of young for the first time in history. Moreover, by 1998 this historic reversal in relative proportions of young and old had already taken place in the more developed regions.

In order to illustrate the dramatic shift in the globe’s demographic profile that would—quite soon—result from this development, the authors of the report offered a series of eye-catching numbers. For example, “The proportion of older persons was 8 percent in 1950 and 10 per cent in 2000, and is projected to reach 21 per cent in 2050.” By the middle of the twenty-first century, in consequence, just over one-fifth of the world’s projected nine billion inhabitants—one in five of all living individuals—will be over sixty. And more people than ever before will survive some way beyond this: “The older population is itself aging. The fastest growing age group in the world is the oldest-old, those aged 80 years or older. By the middle of the century, one-fifth of older persons will be 80 years or older.”²

The trend toward aging populations is neither entirely uniform nor equally advanced everywhere. But it is, as Jürgen Kocka puts it, nevertheless “not a national but rather a transnational and, increasingly, global phenomenon.”³ For all the West’s anxieties about its own evident senescence, no region of the world is unaffected, including the emerging economic giants in Asia (China) and Latin America (Brazil) around which many of these anxieties ultimately coalesce. The United Nations 2012 Report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reiterates that one-fifth of the world’s population will be over sixty by 2050—an increase from today’s “700 million” to “2 billion persons”—but notes that the fastest increase will take place in Africa. The report adds that in western Asia the population of those aged over sixty will quadruple by 2050; that the proportion of older people in the Asia-Pacific region will rise from 10 percent today to 24 percent over the same period, and that a similar profile will become visible in Latin America, which will witness a rise to 25 percent. It is true that Europe will “continue to have the oldest population in the world.”⁴ But it is by no means *uniquely* predestined for old age and decline, even if that is the fear that seems to motivate much of the public (and popular) debate on the “aging society” across the continent. Sarah Harper, Professor of Social Gerontology at the Institute of Ageing at the University of Oxford, testifies:

While the predicted increase by 2025 in the per cent of people over 60 for the EU is around 33 per cent, it is a staggering 400 per cent for Indonesia, 350 per cent for Thailand, Kenya and Mexico, 280 per cent for Zimbabwe and up to 250 per cent for India, China and Brazil. It is this rapidity of demographic ageing which will be one of the greatest institutional challenges for less developed and transitional economies.⁵

What we are witnessing is (in Harper’s words) “a globalization of population aging” that is generating dramatic challenges not only for Western societies but also for the newly dynamic economies of the East that have only recently reaped the demographic bonus of large numbers of young people combined with low old-age dependency ratios (Elderly dependency ratio, or EDR, that is, relatively few older people to be supported by workers).⁶ In the case of China in particular, the *Economist* claimed in 2012 that “over the past 30 years, China’s total fertility rate—the number of children a woman can expect to have during her lifetime—has fallen from 2.6, well above the rate needed to hold a population steady, to 1.56, well below that rate” and that the country now “faces a long period of ultra-low fertility, regardless of what happens to its one-child policy.” The consequences of this will be that China, by 2050, will have a much higher EDR than the United States—where high levels of immigration and high birth rates will continue to depress the country’s

median age⁷—and that it will face similar pressures on its (as yet undeveloped) social security system.⁸

Welfare, retirement age and pensions, health care and residential arrangements, quality of life and social status, and the protection of human rights—these are just some of the issues that both developing and developed countries are facing as the proportion of older people in the global population increases rapidly over the next two to three decades.⁹ And it is the scale of this challenge that has led influential commentators such as Peter Peterson, onetime Chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations, to speak of a “global aging crisis” that “may do more to reshape our collective future” than more frequently cited hazards such as the “proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, high-tech terrorism, superviruses, extreme climate change, the financial, economic, and political aftershocks of globalization, and the violent ethnic explosions waiting to be detonated in today’s unsteady new democracies.”¹⁰ Since Peterson penned these words in 1999, the world has witnessed the attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001, the “war on terror,” and the financial crisis of 2008 and ensuing prolonged economic downturn. But the tumultuous start to the twenty-first century has most likely served only to obscure the imminent graying of the world: “We live in an era of many challenges, from global warming to global terrorism. But few are as certain as global aging—and few are as likely to have such a large and enduring impact on government budgets, living standards, and the future global economic and geopolitical order,” according to the directors of The Global Aging Initiative of The Center for Strategic and International Studies in 2012.¹¹ This does not mean that these challenges cannot be overcome, or that there are not also opportunities. A 2010 report for the World Bank cautions against “mechanistic pessimism” in relation to the economic consequences of demographic change,¹² and many other studies have stressed the cultural and social benefits of an older population.

At the same time, the fact that population aging is a global phenomenon does not prevent it from being apprehended first and foremost in relation to *national* contexts. In the 2012 American presidential elections the security of Medicare, the program that guarantees health insurance for citizens aged 65 and older, was once again one of the most controversial issues being debated by the Democratic incumbent Barack Obama and his Republican rival Mitt Romney, against the background of President Obama’s Affordable Care Act, the eligibility of the baby-boomer generation that began in 2011, and a projected massive rise in health-care costs from 3.7 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2011 to between 6.7 and 10.4 percent in 2086.¹³ And it was of course no accident that the other key theme of that election was China, typically perceived to be America’s chief economic and potential military rival and seen to be “younger” and more dynamic, and as directly benefiting from the United

States' relative decline. In Britain, political debate is similarly focused on the challenges of paying for long-term residential care for the elderly, "fuel poverty" among retirees, and the sustainability of the National Health Service when the number of over-75s admitted to hospital for treatment increased by 66 per cent in the ten years up to 2008.¹⁴

For Germany too, population aging is a pressing social and political concern. (The same is true of Austria and Switzerland, which face similar demographic pressures.¹⁵) Herwig Birg's 2001 *Die demographische Zeitenwende* (The Demographic Turning Point) and Meinhard Miegel's 2002 *Die deformierte Gesellschaft* (The Deformed Society) were widely reviewed and debated, including in the articles by Gustav Seibt and Lothar Müller that began a series in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on the future of the aging society in August 2002, "Auf Wiedersehen Schönheit" (Goodbye Beauty) and "Der Fluch des Ibsenweibs" (The Curse of the Ibsen woman). Both Seibt and Müller invoked Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West 1918 and 1922), in which he depicted the imminent collapse of a Western culture that has grown old and weak. Müller's title "Ibsenweib" alludes to Spengler's ruminations on the "Neue Frau" (new woman) of the early twentieth century, who, like the female protagonist in an Ibsen drama, is altogether too emancipated, too urban, and too *childless* for the good of society.¹⁶ Both, moreover, were widely viewed as being in the vanguard of a revival of conservative thinking about the family, women, and "German" identity.¹⁷

More broadly, population aging is powerfully associated in the Federal Republic with widespread anxiety about the country's low total fertility rate (TFR)—1.39 in 2010, compared to Britain's 1.98, France's 1.98, and America's 1.93, all below the "replacement rate" of 2.1 in industrialized countries¹⁸—and, in the popular imagination, non-white immigration and the supposed danger of *Überfremdung* (the "swamping" of German society).¹⁹ "Kinder statt Inder" (children not Indians), the term coined by Jürgen Rüttgers during an election campaign in the German state of Nordrhein-Westfalen in 2000, continued to resonate more than a decade later,²⁰ as did the occasional calls from the Right to defend a German *Leitkultur* (the preeminence of "German" culture) against multiculturalism.²¹ There are, of course, more reasoned calls for an active pro-natalist policy, for example Herwig Birg's article "Schrumpfen oder Wachsen?" (To Shrink or to Grow) in *Das Parlament* in May 2002, but even here there is striking hyperbole with regard to immigration.²²

And it is true that age and ethnicity are intimately related in the Federal Republic. In 2010, 19.3 per cent of the population had a *Migrationshintergrund* (migration background), that is, nearly a fifth of all people resident in Germany were immigrants or children of recent immigrants, with a median age of 35 as compared to 45.9 for all others.²³ In 2009, conversely, only 4% of people over 65 were not German

nationals.²⁴ Given the fact that very few older immigrants, especially Turks, have been able, or wanted, to acquire German citizenship, this low figure is all the more striking.²⁵

These are important factors in a country in which a onetime SPD politician and former member of the Executive Board of the Deutsche Bundesbank (German Central Bank) can argue from the supposed replacement of an aging and dwindling population by non-white immigrants to a “dumbing-down” of German society and the collapse of its economy, as Thilo Sarrazin did in a book of 2010, *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany Is Doing Away with Itself), which achieved sales of 1.5 million within a year.²⁶ Or when the coeditor of the respected *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Frank Schirrmacher, can argue in his 2004 book *Das Methusalem-Komplott* (The Methuselah Conspiracy)—less hyperbolically but equally controversially—that Germany is facing a crisis of social cohesion arising from rapid aging, mass Muslim immigration, and a loss of confidence on the part of the “natives”:

The task of integration that confronts the generations living today is extraordinary: they must integrate the multitude of most likely predominantly Muslim immigrants, they must persuade our children not to leave the country in the face of a majority of older people, and they must at the same time integrate the young mothers of the future into the world of work and society more generally.²⁷

Schirrmacher mixes widely proposed policy responses to the impact of the demographic aging on the national economy—an increase in female participation in the labor force, which in Germany is relatively low²⁸—with a stoking of popular anxiety vis-à-vis immigration (for example, “the multitude”) and unwelcome social change, that is, with a subtle allusion to the German preoccupation with the so-called *Rabenmütter* or “raven mothers” who betray their children by going out to work.²⁹

Germany *is* aging somewhat more quickly than comparable nations, and this will have a dramatic impact on its public finances. Correlating with a high level of “income adequacy” for pensioners—high pensions, generally around 66% of pre-retirement earnings, and generous benefits—is the country’s poor outlook with regard to its fiscal sustainability. As The 2010 Global Aging Initiative of The Center for Strategic and International Studies concludes: “Four of the seven highest-ranking countries on the income adequacy index (the Netherlands, Brazil, Germany, and the UK) are among the seven lowest-ranking countries on the fiscal sustainability index.”³⁰ In the same way, a rapidly aging population will bring down the size of the labor force, raise the old-age dependency ratio, and reduce economic growth and the country’s ability to resource even current let alone rising living standards.³¹ As things stand, by 2050 the number of people of working age in Germany is predicted to decline from

50 to 40 million people—by 20 percent—and the ratio of over-65s to workers is forecast to rise to around 55%, implying a dependency ratio of just under two workers for every senior.³²

As Helmut Seitz and Martin Werding argue, “demographic change in Germany is particularly severe”:

By international standards, the German baby boom was rather late, peaking in the mid-1960s, and also weak. On the other hand, the subsequent decline in fertility was fast and very pronounced. For more than three decades now, the country has had one of the lowest fertility rates in the industrialized world. At the same time, life expectancy has increased, and continues to do so, quite as much as it does elsewhere. As a result, a massive change in the age structure of the German population is already under way that will become fully visible in the period between 2015 and 2035. Unlike many other countries, Germany is actually faced with the prospects of a declining population and, with even higher certainty, a shrinking labor force, processes that will start from now on and probably last until 2050 and even beyond.³³

Elsewhere in the same volume, Charlotte Höhn, Ralf Mai, and Frank Michee emphasize the catastrophic collapse in fertility in eastern Germany in the years following unification as well as the out-migration of younger people from the territory of the former GDR.³⁴ And Michaela Kreyenfeld and Dirk Konietzka point to “significant labor supply disincentives for married women” and the poor availability of childcare, combining to push women “to decide ‘either’ ‘or’” in respect of paid work and starting a family.³⁵ Without a doubt, fertility and female labor-force participation—in addition to the reforms to retirement age, pensions, and labor-force participation rates among older people that are already in train³⁶—must be addressed if Germany is to adapt to a demographic shift that is as inevitable as it is momentous.³⁷

For all these reasons the discussion in the Federal Republic is characterized by a greater degree of urgency (and contention) than in other countries, even though many, if not all of them, face problems of a similar magnitude only a little further down the road.

At the same time, even if the challenges of population aging are not yet being dealt with as effectively as they might be, they are not being ignored. Government commissions have addressed the issue—most notably the Enquête-Kommission “Demographischer Wandel” (Commission of Inquiry into Demographic Change) that delivered its final report in 2002³⁸—and the Federal Statistical Service has attempted to assess Germany’s imminent aging in comparison with other EU countries in its study “Ältere Menschen in Deutschland und der EU” (Older People in Germany and the EU, 2011).³⁹ All the major research

foundations have sponsored wide-ranging studies such as “Deutschland altert: Demografische Herausforderungen” (Germany Is Growing Older: Demographic Challenges; Roman Herzog Institute, 2004);⁴⁰ “Leben im Alter” (Life in Old Age; Robert Bosch Foundation, 2010);⁴¹ “Altern in Deutschland” (Aging in Germany; from the academic collaboration “Altern in Deutschland” financed by the Jacobs Foundation between 2006 and 2008).⁴² And university institutes in Munich (The Munich Center for the Economics of Aging); Jena (The Leibniz Institute for Age Research); Heidelberg (Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen), and Cologne (The Max Planck Institute for the Biology of Aging) are exploring the theme. Certainly, academic publications such as Herwig Birg’s 2005 edited volume *Auswirkungen der demographischen Alterung und der Bevölkerungsschrumpfung auf Wirtschaft, Staat und Gesellschaft* (Consequences of Demographic Aging and a Shrinking Population for the Economy, State, and Society) are both numerous and widely discussed. Finally, in 1994, the federal government added seniors to the portfolio of the Ministry for Families (created in 1953—young people were specified in 1957, and women three decades later), although an umbrella association of older people’s groups (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Senioren-Organisationen) had been supported by the ministry since 1989, with the task of coordinating the lobbying and outreach efforts of more than 100 organizations.

More generally, each of the major political parties has a special section for older people, and the Sozialverband Deutschland (Social Organization Germany), with more than half a million members and 3000 local branches, campaigns actively on issues directly affecting older people, such as poverty and social isolation. And groups such as the Senior Experten Service seek to re-engage retirees by matching their experience and skills with younger people who are starting their own businesses or to promote “aktives Altern” (active aging).

Aging in German Culture

Of course, aging is not only a social or economic issue. It resonates culturally too. To an even greater extent than in other Western countries, the shelves of German bookshops are filled with volumes on aging, ranging from the serious to the decidedly middlebrow. Senior manager Herbert Henzler and CDU (Christian Democrat) politician Lothar Späth outline policy solutions for the aging crisis in *Der Generationen-Pakt: Warum die Alten nicht das Problem, sondern die Lösung sind* (The Generational Contract: Why Old People Are Not the Problem but the Solution, 2011), much as former SPD (Social Democrat) spokesperson, diplomat, and journalist Uwe-Karsten Heye does in *Gewonnene Jahre: oder Die revolutionäre Kraft der alternden Gesellschaft* (Extra Years; or the Revolutionary

Power of the Aging Society, 2008). Academics Professor Ernst Pöppel and Dr. Beatrice Wagner contribute to a substantial body of “popular science” books on the subject with *Je älter desto besser* (The Older, the Better, 2010), whereas Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen (famous for her 1967 *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (The Inability to Mourn), cowritten with Alexander Mitscherlich) offers a psychoanalyst’s perspective in *Die Radikalität des Alters: Einsichten einer Psychoanalytikerin* (The Radicality of Old Age: A Psychoanalyst’s Insights, 2010), which was published just before her death at the age of 94, in 2012. Silvia Bovenschen, another well-known feminist academic, presents a more philosophical approach in her *Älter werden: Notizen* (Growing Older: Notes, 2006). Here it is worth noting the prominence of older women writers and intellectuals who published important texts during the first-wave feminist movement of the 1970s: the filmmaker Helke Sander’s short stories *Der letzte Geschlechtsverkehr* (The Last Sexual Intercourse, 2011), claims the topic of old age and sex for older women. And Elisabeth Niejahr in *Alt sind nur die anderen* (Only Other People Are Old, 2004) and Claudius Seidl in *Schöne junge Welt* (Beautiful Young World, 2005) serve up rather generalized sociological analyses. More broadly, old people speak for themselves in collections of their stories such as Sabine Bode’s *Wir Alten: Porträts einer lebenserfahrenen Generation* (We Old People: Portraits of a Generation with Life Experience, 2008).⁴³

Above all, the market is dominated by “popular” texts. Men might receive guidance from Eckart Hammer’s *Männer altern anders: Eine Gebrauchsanweisung* (Men Age Differently: An Instruction Manual, 2007), whereas women might opt for any number of self-help books, including *Selbstbestimmt und solidarisch: Frauen und das Alter* (Independent and in Solidarity: Women and Old Age, 2005) by Hanna Habermann, Ute Wannig, and Barbara Heun; Christine Swientek’s *Mit 40 depressiv, mit 70 um die Welt: Wie Frauen älter werden* (Depressive at 40, Off Round the World at 70: How Women Age, 2003), and Barbara Dribbusch’s *Älter werden ist viel schöner, als Sie vorhin in der Umkleidekabine noch dachten* (Growing Older Is Much More Beautiful than You Thought previously in the Fitting Room, 2012). Or, for both sexes, one might choose Peter Gross and Karin Fagetti’s *Glücksfall Alter: Alte Menschen sind gefährlich, weil sie keine Angst vor der Zukunft haben* (Lucky Old Age: Old People Are Dangerous Because They Are Not Afraid of the Future, 2009); Henning Scherf’s *Grau ist bunt: Was im Alter möglich ist* (Gray Is Multicolored: What’s Possible in Old Age, 2007); Matthias Irle’s *Älterwerden für Anfänger* (Growing Old for Beginners, 2009), or any of very many other comparable books.⁴⁴

On the screen too, old age is an important theme—here, we glimpse the influence of a cinema-going audience that is itself aging.⁴⁵ Piet Eekmann’s 1998 *Die Männer meiner Oma* (My Grandma’s Men)

addresses the discomfort that younger people often experience with regard to old-age sexuality, and particularly older women's sexuality, as the filmmaker listens to his 78-year-old grandmother's account of her love life, including her most recent fantasies. Similar, but far better known, is Andreas Dresen's *Wolke 9* (Cloud 9, 2008), in which Inge, in her mid-60s, cheats on her husband, Werner, during a highly physical affair with Karl (in his mid-70s). Some members of Dresen's audience were scandalized by the explicit sexual scenes. Katrin Bühlig's 2001 *Kribbeln im Bauch* (Stomach Butterflies) examines the reactions of grown-up children to a love affair between a man in his nineties and a woman in her late eighties. In Bühlig's film, a further theme is the *Altersheim* (retirement home) and the implied question of whether there can be a new lease of life in old age. (Christoph Schaub's *Giulias Verschwinden* [Giulia's Disappearance], made in 2009, touches on similar themes, but in comic mode, as does Josefine Preuss's *Lotta & die alten Eisen* [Lotta and the Old Scrapheaps, 2010].) In Christoph Englert's *Nebeneinander* (Next to One Another, 2010), the focus is on Alzheimer's—a condition that currently afflicts around 1.2 million of the 16.5 million Germans over 60⁴⁶—in a moving depiction of Walther's ever less successful efforts to get through to his wife. In contrast, Michael Haneke's *Liebe* (Love, 2012), which won the Golden Palm of the Cannes International Film Festival following its premiere there, explores a husband's inability to cope with his wife's partial paralysis and dementia following a stroke. The French-German coproduction *Et si on vivait tous ensemble? / Und wenn wir alle zusammenziehen?* (And If We All Lived Together?, 2011) also thematizes dementia, but as a comedy starring Daniel Brühl as the much younger fifth member of a household of old-timers and occasional object of their (sexual) fantasies. In Sophie Heldman's *Satte Farben vor Schwarz* (Thick Colors before Black, 2010), the mood is more melancholic, as the film depicts an older couple's struggle to adjust to the husband's debilitating illness and their decision to commit suicide together. Suicide, and particularly assisted suicide—*Sterbehilfe*—is of course a topic that may be even more controversial in Germany than elsewhere on account of the historical memory of the Nazis' euthanasia program.⁴⁷ Tilmann Jens's book *Demenz*, which deals with his father's dementia, launched a ferocious debate in 2009 because of Walter Jens's standing as a leading intellectual of the wartime generation and to his previous support of the individual's right to choose the time and manner of his or her ending.⁴⁸

Aging is now a prominent topic on German television as well. Jörg Lüthmann's three-part TV thriller *2030: Aufstand der Alten* (2030: Uprising of the Old People, 2007) presents a dystopian vision of future solutions to the "problem" of caring for the elderly. Less elaborate, the soap *Rote Rosen* (Red Roses), which is aimed at an older audience, achieved a market share of 10.1 percent of viewers in its time slot in

2011.⁴⁹ In 2011, moreover, the first “Theaterfestival 60plus” took place in Rudolstadt, featuring fifteen productions on old age by nine amateur and professional theater groups.⁵⁰ And the photo competition “Neue Bilder vom Alter(n)” (New Images of Age and Aging), sponsored by the academic collaboration “Altern in Deutschland,” attracted more than 400 entries, and an exhibition of eighty images toured Germany through 2012.⁵¹ A year earlier, in 2011, the Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen (German Center for Gerontology) had shown a series of photographic portraits of centenarians taken by Karsten Thormaehlen between 2006 and 2011.⁵²

Aging in Contemporary German Literature

Finally, old age is a major theme in contemporary German-language literature.⁵³ Indeed, recent texts build on a tradition that reaches back to classical times—notably, Plato, Pindar, Cicero, and Seneca—and that was reanimated by figures as diverse as Immanuel Kant, Jacob Grimm, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Thomas Mann, as well as by other illustrious predecessors, such as Wieland, Goethe, Storm, Hoffmann, Raabe, Stifter, and Fontane.⁵⁴ In respect of works analyzed in this book, Jacob Grimm’s 1860 lecture “Über das Alter” (On Old Age) features in Günter Grass’s 2010 work *Grimms Wörter* (The Grimms’ Words), and Goethe’s *Der Mann von fünfzig Jahren* (A Man of Fifty Years, 1817) is a key intertext for *Ein liebender Mann* (A Man in Love, 2008) by Martin Walser. Christa Wolf, similarly, may draw on Thomas Mann’s novel of old-age retrospection, *Doktor Faustus* (1947), in *Stadt der Engel* (City of Angels, 2010), as we shall discuss later in chapter 2.

There has also been a long tradition in German writing of reflection on growing old and the creative process: Grimm’s “Über das Alter,” but also Hermann Broch’s “Mythos und Altersstil” (Myth and Old-Age Style, 1947); Gottfried Benn’s extended essay *Altern als Problem für Künstler* (Aging as a Problem for Artists, 1954); Ernst Bloch’s chapter “Was im Alter zu wünschen übrig bleibt” (What Remains to Be Wished for in Old Age, 1959); Arno Schmidt’s article “Ich bin erst sechzig” (I Am Only 60, 1960); Hans Erich Nossack’s “Das Problem des Alterns aus der Sicht des Schriftstellers” (The Problem of Aging from the Perspective of the Writer, 1969);⁵⁵ and Siegfried Lenz’s 2010 speech “Etwas über das Alter” (Something on Old Age) and his *Die Darstellung des Alters in der Literatur* (The Representation of Age in Literature, 1999). The philosopher Jean Améry’s treatise *Über das Altern* (On Aging, 1968) has also been influential. Indeed, how a writer is to view earlier work in old age (Benn) and the relationship between creativity and temporality (Améry) are questions that continue to resonate. Wolfgang Hilbig’s fragment *Die Nacht am Ende der Straße* (The Night at the End of the Street, 2009,

in *Erzählungen und Kurzprosa*), which tells of an aging writer who has become a drunk, explores the legacy an author may hope to leave. In Walser's *Muttersohn* (Mother's Boy, 2011), in contrast, we might glimpse an echo of Améry's musings on the uncanny disjuncture between former and present selves.⁵⁶

For the most part, however, the extensive engagement with growing old manifest in recent German-language fiction is issue-driven rather than reflexive. Tanja Dückers takes up the theme of the retirement home in her short story "Lux Aeterna" (Eternal Light, in the collection *Café Brazil*, 2001), examining there the question of dignity in old age, as do Annette Pehnt's *Haus der Schildkröten* (House of Turtles, 2006) and Leonie Ossowski's *Die schöne Gegenwart* (The Beautiful Present, 2001). The possibility (or not) of new beginnings for older women is the subject of Monika Maron's *Endmoränen* (End Moraines, 2002) and *Ach Glück* (O Luck, 2007).⁵⁷ Gerhard Köpf's *Ein alter Herr* (An Old Man, 2007) portrays the increasing detachment of an elderly male professor.⁵⁸ Barbara Bronnen's *Am Ende ein Anfang* (At the End, a Beginning, 2006) returns to the topic of passion in old age, as former lovers glimpse one another at a railway station and begin a correspondence inflected by reminiscence and desire.⁵⁹ Georg Diez's *Der Tod meiner Mutter* (The Death of My Mother, 2009) and Arno Geiger's *Der König in seinem Exil* (The King in His Exile, 2011), in contrast, present autobiographical accounts of a parent's drawn-out death and of the difficulties their children have in coming to terms with this process. And Harriet Köhler's *Und dann diese Stille* (And Then This Silence, 2010) confronts the same issue in the form of a novel.⁶⁰ Finally, dementia is a key theme in Katharina Hacker's *Die Erdbeeren von Antons Mutter* (The Strawberries of Anton's Mother, 2010),⁶¹ in which the son, a doctor, finds it difficult to deal with the reality that he is unable to help his mother.⁶²

We also find a striking number of novels by male writers starring older men who are beset by anxiety with regard to their potential or real loss of sexual function, yet are also correspondingly lustful. This *Altherrenerotik* (old-man's-lustfulness) is a feature of the novels by Günter Grass and Martin Walser examined in this book, as we shall discuss in later chapters. But it is also present in works by authors as diverse as Christoph Hein in *Weiskerns Nachlass* (Weiskern's Estate, 2011), Adolf Muschg in *Nur ausziehen wollte sie sich nicht* (Just No Undressing, 1995)—complete with an orgy in a Japanese night club—and Botho Strauss in *Die Nacht mit Alice, als Julia ums Haus schlich* (The Night with Alice, as Julia Crept around the House, 2003).⁶³ For women writers, lust is almost never a central theme—there is no female Philip Roth—though the loss of attractiveness, at least as society defines it for women, that comes with aging often appears to bother female protagonists, for example Wolf's alter ego in *Stadt der Engel*, who compares herself with her youthful companions.

An exception is *Nacktbadestrand* (Nudists' Beach, 2010) by the elderly Austrian writer Elfriede Vavrik, which was inspired by the adventures that followed her placement of a personal ad. For some, the book was a poor sequel to the much younger Charlotte Roche's erotic novel *Feuchtgebiete* (Wetlands, 2008). For others it was a bold expression of female desire.⁶⁴

There are many other examples of the literary treatment of such issues. But it may be useful to highlight a trend that points to a broader significance of aging for German society today. This is the recent abundance of texts in which growing old prompts reflection on the importance of generation in a country in which a powerful cohort effect has been created by a series of dramatic historical caesurae, namely a first unification in blood and iron, war, defeat, revolution, a second war, a second defeat, division, and a second unification in democratic capitalism.⁶⁵ Ulla Hahn's *Unscharfe Bilder* (Blurred Images, 2003),⁶⁶ which reprises the *Vaterromane* (father novels) of the 1970s and 1980s, suggests a desire on the part of its author to achieve a more balanced reckoning with her father as he fades toward his ultimate demise and she grows old in turn. Hahn was born in 1946 and is a member of the generation born to parents implicated in the Nazi dictatorship.⁶⁷ Rafael Seligmann's *Der Milchmann* (The Milkman, 1998), in contrast, offers a comic fictionalization of an elderly Holocaust survivor's reflections on his seemingly unnatural post-war domestication in the land of the perpetrators, with a sideswipe at an insincere philo-Semitism. And, quite different, the Austrian (half-Slovenian) writer Peter Handke's *Die Morawische Nacht* (The Moravian Night, 2010) presents a quasi-mystical text in which the author's alter ego journeys on the river Morava, visiting his parents' grave, conjuring up the voices of those he has known, and looking back over who he has become. This all takes place in the memory landscape of war and genocide into which central Europeans of Handke's generation were born.

Other writers of this generation have been looking back to their twenty-something involvement in the student protests of the late 1960s. Uwe Timm's *Rot* (Red, 2001), Peter Schneider's *Skylla* (2005), and F. C. Delius's *Mein Jahr als Mörder* (My Year as a Murderer, 2004) reassess the revolutionary fervor of that time, whether their actions were justified in the fight against a West German state that was quick to suppress dissent, and their narrators'/authors' mellowing into old age in the decades that followed.⁶⁸ For Monika Maron, a writer of the same generation, but who grew up in the GDR (she left for West Germany in 1988), the focus is on psychological deformation, the feeling of having lived a wasted life, and disorientation in the post-unification present. In Maron's 1996 *Animal Triste*, a woman from the former GDR, aged around 50, appears prematurely redundant and withdraws into self-stupifying reminiscences of a love affair with a West German following the fall of the Wall.⁶⁹ In *Endmoränen*, a woman growing into late middle age feels herself to be

both sexually and socially redundant as she looks back on her career as a writer of (mildly) subversive biographies during the GDR and wonders what purpose her life might serve after the end of that state.⁷⁰

Twenty or so years older than these writers, a generation of German authors born from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s—now in their mid-eighties—are writing memoirs, reflections, and autobiographically inspired texts, acutely conscious that they are nearing the end of their lives. Günter de Bruyn, born in 1926, is one of the best known: “denn Altwerden bedeute auch, sich nicht mehr als Kind der Zeit zu empfinden” (growing older also means to no longer feel yourself to be a child of the age), as he wrote in a note in his 2001 *Unzeitgemäßes: Betrachtungen über Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Untimely Reflections: Observations on Past and Present).⁷¹ The Austrian poet Friederike Mayröcker, who was born in 1924, is another. Her proliferation of abstract verse is a form of “Rebellion gegen die Vergänglichkeit” (Rebellion against the transitory), as the title of a film about her by Carmen Tartarotti has it. Thus her 1992 *Das besessene Alter* (Possessed Old Age) initiated a series of lyrical confrontations with old age, death, and the loss of her partner, the poet Ernst Jandl, that continues to the present: “Der Tod ist mein Feind. Ich kann die Tatsache des Todes überhaupt nicht akzeptieren” (Death is my enemy. I can in no way accept the fact of death).⁷² Not quite as involved, but similarly reflective, is Peter Rühmkorf’s collection of poems *Paradiesvogelschiff* (Fear of the Bird of Paradise, 2008), many of which were written during his terminal cancer:

Von einer gewissen Gleichgültigkeitswarte aus
 ließe sich vielleicht sogar noch
 über diesen oder jenen Lichtblick verhandeln
 . . .
 und du tust dich statt mit deinen Altersbeschwerden
 ausnahmsweise mal
 als großer Wohltäterätäter hervor.

[From a certain parked indifference
 we might even perhaps haggle
 over this or that ray of hope
 . . .
 and you push yourself forward
 for once, instead of with your old-age complaints,
 as a great benefactor-do-gooder.]
 (“Rückblickend mein eigenes Leben . . .” /
 Looking Back My Own Life)⁷³

Erica Pedretti is more accepting of old age in a series of “memory texts,” including *Fremd genug* (Foreign Enough, 2010), which details how she

survived the war and found her way to Switzerland, and the life that followed.⁷⁴ And then there is Edgar Hilsenrath's *Berlin . . . Endstation* (Final Station . . . Berlin, 2006), which presents a satirical story of an elderly Jewish writer's return to Germany, the Federal Republic's culture of contrition, and, perhaps inevitably, his old-man's-lustfulness. Or we might think of Ludwig Harig, who, like de Bruyn in *Zwischenbilanz* (Interim Balance, 1992) and *Vierzig Jahre* (Forty Years, 1996), had written autobiographically in his mid-60s, namely in *Weh dem, der aus der Reihe tanzt* (Woe Betide Him Who Dances Out of Line, 1992) and *Wer mit den Wölfen heult, wird Wolf* (He Who Howls with the Wolves Becomes a Wolf, 1996). Harig's 2002 short stories *Und wenn sie nicht gestorben sind: Aus meinem Leben* (And They All Lived Happily Ever After: From My Life) are more obviously marked by the seventy-five-year-old author's awareness of how long he has lived and how much less time remains.

The authors examined in this book are of the same generation. In chapter 1, we look at Günter Grass's *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (Peeling the Onion, 2006), *Die Box* (The Box, 2008), and *Grimms Wörter* (The Grimms' Words, 2010). Like de Bruyn's and Harig's works, but appearing a decade and more later, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* stretches from its author's prewar adolescence through to his conscription into the Nazi war machine—Grass joined the *Waffen SS*, something he revealed only in 2006—and into the early postwar period.⁷⁵ In *Die Box* Grass shapes a postwar “family memoir,” and *Grimms Wörter* presents the author's attempt to shape his legacy in what he called his “wahrscheinlich letztes Buch” (last book, most likely).⁷⁶ In chapter 2 we shift focus to Ruth Klüger's *weiter leben* of 1992, in her English translation as *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, in 2001,⁷⁷ and *unterwegs verloren* (Lost On the Way, 2008), which recount the Austrian-Jewish survivor's ordeal in Nazi concentration camps and her postwar emigration to the United States. This chapter also examines Christa Wolf's *Stadt der Engel* (City of Angels, 2010), an account of the writer's sojourn in Los Angeles in the early 1990s and a reflection on her implication in the GDR's failure to realize the socialist ideal to which she had dedicated her life. In the old-age work of both authors, the Nazi past and its enduring consequences are again central to their old-age reflections. And in chapter 3, we turn to Martin Walser's *Der Augenblick der Liebe* (The Moment of Love, 2004), *Angstblüte* (Final Flowering, 2006) and *Ein liebender Mann* (A Man in Love, 2008), and then to his 2011 novel *Muttersohn* (Mother's Boy). In each book of Walser's “old-age” trilogy, an elderly man falls for a much younger woman. In *Muttersohn*, in contrast, Augustin is more interested in spiritual transcendence than in making a fool of himself. Moreover, having come to terms with “who he is” at sixty-three, he appears not to age any further. None of the four books is directly autobiographical, unlike the texts by Grass, Klüger, and Wolf explored in chapters 1 and 2.

However, the way they foreground issues of shame and conscience points to a high degree of intertextuality in relation to their author's real-life—and controversial—pronouncements on present-day framings of the Nazi past and German responsibility.

Writing about Old Age or Old-Age Writing?

How do these contemporary literary texts relate to the demographic data set out in the opening pages of my introduction? What is the significance of the truism that older authors write about (their own) aging in ways that are markedly different from the way their younger peers tackle the same theme? What is the distinction between old-age writing and writing *about* old age? And what is to be gained from an examination of texts by the eighty-plus-year-old writers that I have chosen to present in this book?

For one, it is apparent that younger writers tend toward *representation* in their literary reworking of a process of growing old of which they have only initial or limited experience. Younger authors have a propensity for the sociological, with portrayals of family conflict, caring for elderly parents, dementia, and assisted suicide that relate directly to the demographic changes described at the start of this introduction. Older writers more frequently incline toward *remembering*. This no doubt relates to what Jan Assmann identifies as the general human desire to fix personal remembering with advancing years.⁷⁸ Or, to speak with Jean Améry, it might have to do with the “corporealization” of time in old age—“Zeit haben im Körper” (containing time in the body).⁷⁹ It may also predict older authors’ predilection for the philosophical. Whereas younger writers mostly focus on aging as an “issue,” older writers are more likely to probe the interplay between subjective memory and “real” history and the constitution of the remembering self in old age. And this is all the more true for the authors examined in this book—that is, writers in their eighties. These may be distinguished from authors in their sixties, say, to the extent that their texts often present a *second* casting back over their lives which may revise, or even repudiate, a retrospective written decades earlier. In his “early” autobiography *Zwischenbilanz* Günter de Bruyn anticipates precisely this kind of “old-age” revision: “Mit achtzig gedenke ich, Bilanz über mein Leben zu ziehen; die Zwischenbilanz, die ich mit sechzig beginne, soll eine Vorübung sein” (when I am eighty I imagine I will take stock of my life; the interim stock-taking that I am beginning at sixty is intended as practice).⁸⁰ And Christa Wolf’s *Stadt der Engel* and Martin Walser’s *Muttersohn* offer conspicuous examples of a second round of life review, as we shall see in later chapters.

Naturally, there are exceptions. Older writers certainly also represent, as well as ruminate on, (their own) aging. A group of pensioners arrive

by bus for breakfast at a hotel frequented by Walser's Karl von Kahn in *Angstblüte*, just as he has woken from a night of passion with the much younger Joni. His enduring sex drive contrasts sharply with the more "age-appropriate" behavior of his peers as they allow themselves to be shepherded from tourist destination to tourist destination.⁸¹ In Wolf's *Stadt der Engel* we glimpse something of the isolation of the aging woman who is conscious of, and not always adverse to, the way her age sets her apart from her fellow researchers at the Getty Institute, where she is based during her stay in Los Angeles. Klüger, similarly, dwells in *unterwegs verloren* on the comfort provided by female friendship in later years, whereas Grass indicts the marginalization endured by the elderly when he presents himself as a "Dinosaurier" (dinosaur).⁸²

More generally, we should not forget that the writers themselves embody certain demographic realities related to their generation, nationality, and historical positionality. Their relative ethnic homogeneity (non-Jewish or Jewish) is indicative of the fact that large-scale immigration to the Federal Republic did not begin until the early 1950s,⁸³ just as the (demographically speaking) unexpected prominence of Grass and Walser speaks of the continued significance of *men* of the 45er generation, even against the backdrop of what Thomas Scharf calls the current "feminization" of aging in the Federal Republic on account of greater rises in female longevity.⁸⁴ Equally, the focus on the Nazi era by writers of this generation, of whichever sex, may be thought to style a negatively charged but nonetheless exclusive "ethnic ownership" of German history, and of German identity, that may be challenged as increasing numbers of older citizens of different ethnic backgrounds begin to narrate a different kind of national belonging.

Conversely, there are younger writers who are both highly conscious of their own aging and focused on remembering. Around the millennium a cohort of "78ers" wrote a series of nostalgic novels about turning thirty and about what they saw as the disappearance, post-unification, of the West Germany of their youth.⁸⁵ And there are young authors who understand aging to be an epistemological concern as well as a social issue. Harriet Köhler's *Und dann diese Stille*, which tells of a father, son, and grandfather reconciling at the grandfather's deathbed, is unusual insofar as its young writer (Köhler was born in 1977) presents aging not only as something to be "dealt with" but also as something that forces each generation to resituate itself vis-à-vis the (Nazi) past.

By and large, however, old-age writing—texts by authors of advanced years in which growing old is not only a theme but also a philosophical category—is less obviously a response to Germany's changing population profile than the writing *about* old age penned by their younger peers. This might be thought to be self-evident. The emphasis in old-age writing on looking back appears to have little to do with demographic predictions