

A letter on a forum with Norman Mailer and Günter Grass in New York

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Dear WSWS,

Last month I attended a forum at the New York Public Library on 42nd Street in Manhattan featuring the writers Günter Grass and Norman Mailer, entitled, “The 20th Century on Trial.”

Both of these figures have some claim to delivering a verdict. Grass (born 1927) was one of the postwar artists who called on German society to confront the period of fascism in a compassionate and intelligent way, especially in his first novel, *The Tin Drum*. He exposed the continuity between many of the leaders and functionaries of the Federal Republic of Germany and the former Nazi regime.

Mailer (born 1923), who went through an early flirtation with Marxism, has produced significant novels that dealt with the war and postwar social life in the United States including *The Naked and the Dead* and *Barbary Shore*. He was a visible figure in New York intellectual and political life during the 1960s and 1970s, even running in the Democratic Party primary for mayor, half-seriously, on one occasion. His new novel, the *Castle in the Forrest*, is about Adolph Hitler’s childhood.

In other words, these men are substantial figures and one had a right to expect something serious on the topic of the 20th Century.

It was a disappointing event. Not only didn’t they come to a verdict, but also there was no argument as to the nature of the century, no presentation of evidence, no witnesses called.

The moderator/interviewer, Andrew O’Hagan, Scottish novelist and contributing editor of the *London Review of Books*, described it as “bold evening,” but it was precisely the opposite.

O’Hagan badgered Grass about the “revelation” in Grass’s recent memoirs, *Peeling the Onion*, that as a 17-year old boy he had served in the Waffen SS, an

organization that was convicted, in toto, for war crimes during the Nuremberg Trials. [1]

Grass answered this by asking, if he, a young conscript was to be compared to Kurt Kiesinger, the Christian Democratic Chancellor of West Germany from 1966 to 1969, who as an adult man had served as a propagandist in the Nazi Foreign Ministry. [2]

Grass blamed the similar questions in Germany on the general ignorance of German journalists about the war period.

When asked about the rise neo-Nazism in Germany, he cited the social disaster that had befallen the people of Eastern Europe after 1989. Arguing for a return to social reformism, he said, “There is no reason to allow the capitalistic system to destroy the social system all over the world.”

Grass lamented that the United States was no longer an inspiration to the world, as it had been for him when he first came here in the 1960s and saw hundreds of young volunteers active in campaigns for the Democratic Party. He believed that an emulation of this kind of politics helped Willy Brandt to come to power in Germany in 1969.

“Perhaps this will return after the next election ... but let’s see,” he said, and laughed along with the audience.

The 84-year old Mailer did not go very far in assessing the 20th Century either. He mostly spoke about his age, gave an anecdote or two about growing up in Brooklyn, talked about stabbing his second wife.

When O’Hagan asked him about “honor and shame in America on Iraq,” all Mailer could say was that he was “angry with America, but in love with America.” He acknowledged that it was America’s worst war ever because so many Iraqis had died. In answer to a question about whether he would support Hillary Clinton in the 2008 election, Mailer replied,

“Probably” She had earned it and he would support the Democrats.

Mailer then had a chance to air his pessimism, to pronounce the fascist state a more normal condition for humans than a democratic state. It was hard, he said, to believe that the right was not going to triumph sooner or later.

After Mailer’s interview, Grass came back on stage for a three-way discussion. There was a discussion of Hitler, of how Hitler could have arisen. Mailer quipped that it was because devil willed it, and finally proposed that the question was “unanswerable”

Grass gave a more thoughtful answer, or at least posed the question correctly: “How it was possible that German people who really did believe in culture, how it was possible to give power to people [the Nazis] like this?”

Hitler was the product of his nation and of his times. But what the character of these times was, Grass did not say. The Social Democrats were in the center—here apparently was some hope, but the Communists and Nazis were united against the Social Democrats.

Grass mentioned the 19th Century several times, but almost always in the context of the development of “German hubris.” Mailer referred to 1932, the year his mother told him that Hitler would kill half the Jews of Europe.

These were the earliest dates anyone on the stage mentioned that evening. The mass movements, the civil wars, the revolutions (Russian and German), earlier and later, were all missing from the “trial” of the 20th Century.

After this, the authors engaged in a historical counterfactual: what if Hitler had been able to enter art school in Vienna and had become an artist? Grass said that he had once written (and not published) a short story to this effect. He believed that it would have made little difference in the final outcome of history.

Mailer agreed that Hitler would have become a certain type of artist, “the intense mediocrity that succeeds at art at a low level, poisoning the mood and atmosphere around them for many years.”

Both authors agreed that Hitler would have excelled in a contemporary art school. “There are so many possibilities in art schools today to do things without any talent,” Grass said.

These were good insights, but, given the lofty tasks

imposed by the title of the evening’s discussion, distinctly minor. One had the impression that the collapse of social reformism—the rightward course of the Democratic Party in the US and the German Social Democrats—had left these two men stranded.

Mailer summed their mutual confusion up in one of the few references to the course of the last century: the [undefined] problems of the 20th Century have come back in a new form, but we don’t know how it’s going to turn out. We see a “world of miracles and monstrosities and we don’t know how to measure it.”

Sandy English

The program can be seen on streaming video here

Notes:

[1] Though he did not mention this, as a conscript Grass was exempted from the Nuremberg judgment.

[2] The novelist John Irving has written an effective, though politically limited, defense of Grass in a recent review of *Peeling the Onion: “A Soldier Once,”* *New York Times Book Review*, July 8, 2007 here



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