An appraisal of German writer Günter Grass: 1927-2015

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Günter Grass, who died April 13 at the age of 87, ranks as one of Germany's most remarkable authors. He was a wonderful narrative writer, and this judgement also applies to his works that were less successful than his outstanding Danzig trilogy of novels (*The Tin Drum*, 1959, *Cat and Mouse*, 1961, *Dog Years*, 1963).

Amongst Grass's role models were German writer Alfred Döblin, Irish novelist James Joyce and other leading storytellers of the 20th century. Along with Siegfried Lens, Heinrich Böll and Uwe Johnson, he was a decisive voice in German postwar literature and made a significant contribution to a literary engagement with the traumas of 20th century history.

Grass's world reputation does not rest alone on his epic fiction works, above all his début novel *The Tin Drum*. The fact that he continuously expressed his opinions on contemporary political issues, posed awkward questions and provided answers to them, invariably encountering strong criticism from sections of the media and politicians, was closely bound up with his artistic work.

With his critical perspective on society and history, the novelist attempted to break through the veil of forgetting and cover-up propagated by the postwar political establishment in Germany. It is testament to Grass's steadfastness that his list of opponents ranged from leading figures in the Adenauer era (Konrad Adenauer was chancellor of West Germany from 1949 to 1963), when many old Nazis held high positions within the state and in business, to prominent politicians and media personalities in the present day.

As both a storyteller and critical moralist, Grass was always concerned with drawing attention to the unresolved problems of the past. In doing so, he utilised piercing and grotesque comedy in his works, which often left the laughter stuck in one's throat. Already in *The Tin Drum*, this artistic technique was clear, as was the frequently broken up narrative style.

The Tin Drum

In Grass's first novel, the "drummer" of the title, Oskar Matzerath, in his thirties, is in a mental hospital where he writes down his life story, in the early 1950s. This story begins in 1899 with the alarmingly comical conceiving of what turns out to be Oskar's mother under the "four skirts" of Anna Bronski, a Kashubian (member of a West Slavic ethnic group), impregnated by the Polish freedom fighter and terrorist Josef Kolyaiczek, who is hiding from the police.

The episodes, Oskar's experiences and adventures, are recounted one after another. In the process, Oskar sometimes narrates from the author's point of view, speaking of himself in the third person, and at other times in the first person. Repeatedly, a comment or reference appears giving some historical perspective to the story, even though it has nothing to do with the immediate action. For example, the chapter "Under the Raft" takes place in 1899 when in South Africa, "Ohm Kruger was brushing his bushy anti-British eyebrows."

The hero is born a "clairaudient infant", his "mental development [was] completed at birth and after that merely needs a certain amount of filling in."

Shortly after birth, Oskar watches a moth circling around a light bulb. He perceives the noise it makes as a drumming on the light bulb. His mother promises to give him a drum for his third birthday, a promise she keeps. Oskar becomes a drummer. At the same time, he rejects further growth from his third birthday onward and distances himself from the "grown-ups."

"Today Oskar says simply: The moth drummed. … men beat on basins, tin pans, bass drums, and kettle drums. We speak of drum fire, drumhead courts; we drum up, drum out, drum into. There are drummer boys and drum majors … but all this is nothing beside the orgy of drumming carried out by that moth in the hour of my birth."

When he receives the drum he decides: "I would never under any circumstances be a politician, much less grocer, that I would stop right there, remain as I was—and so I did; for many years." This was a clear rejection of Oskar's petty bourgeois father and later Nazi Party member, Alfred Matzerath, who wanted him to inherit the shop, and an allusion to somebody who decided to become a politician (i.e. Adolf Hitler).

The young Oskar is highly subversive—for example, when he causes chaos at a Nazi Party rally by playing his drum under the speaker's tribune and eventually getting everyone to dance. This scene is brilliantly portrayed in the film of the same name by Volker Schlöndorff (1979).

But Oskar can also raise his voice effectively to alter the course of events or people's plans, e.g., when they want to take his drum away. He can produce frequencies with his voice sufficient to make glass break, a talent he uses not only as a weapon of self-defence, but also to entertain soldiers in the theatre at the front and earn his living. *The Tin Drum* is often described as a character study, a novel dealing with personal development, but in many respects it is quite the opposite, Oskar does not "develop" for over two decades, rather he is a sharp observer and seemingly childish and naive commentator on the life of adults, their petty bourgeois environment and the events into which they are drawn and become jointly responsible for, especially the crimes of National Socialism and the war—events they did not cause but did nothing to prevent.

For his part, Oskar continues to drum, but sees himself as partly responsible as well. For example, for the death of his uncle, or possible father, Jan Bronski, who takes part in the defence of the Polish post office in Danzig against the Nazis and is subsequently shot. Here Grass, as he acknowledged, is working through his own experience; as a 13-year-old he felt guilty because he had not asked about the fate of his uncle, who was shot during this episode like the novel's character.

Grass's language

Grass's language is full of influences from the Baroque and classical periods, Grimm's fairy tales and such. It is vivid and gripping. In his surreal narrative style he combines contemporary history, grotesquely depicted episodes, sharply drawn characters, coarse eroticism and all sorts of sensuous pleasures with improbable events to reveal a larger or concealed truth. In the process he makes use of a broad range of metaphor and allegory, often based on the animal world.

This is very evident in the third volume of his Danzig trilogy, *Dog Years*. In the book, dogs and birds become the symbols for human actions. The novel deals with Hitler's dog and his famous bloodline, thereby parodying the Nazis' racial policy.

In *The Rats* (1986) the subject is the apocalypse brought about by humanity's wars and destruction of the environment, while at the same time alluding to the disgusting classification of Jews as rats by the Nazis.

Animals also play an important part in Grass's pictorial art. Originally, he completed an apprenticeship as a stonemason, and studied sculpture and graphics. He created sculptures until his last years and has left behind an extensive graphical body of work. He often illustrated his own books. Most recently he was working on a newly illustrated version of *Dog Years*.

His origins as a visual artist certainly helped him develop an inquisitive and unobstructed view of social reality. This differentiated him from the misanthropic and pessimistic voices of contemporaries such as the German philosopher Theodor Adorno who declared one could no longer write poetry after Auschwitz, music could no longer sound beautiful and fine art could no longer be understood.

As a graphic artist and sculptor, Grass remained focused on the object. He rejected the modern abstract work propagated at the Düsseldorf Art Academy during his time there. Neither did he have any time for the work of his atelier neighbour in the Düsseldorf Art Academy Josef Beuys who emerged as the rising star of West German art.

In a highly readable interview with *Die Zeit* a year ago, Grass said of Beuys, "Yes, he was in the studio next door, went around in Jesus sandals and was anthroposophically inspired. I met him many years later, he was a friendly type, but when he began to talk about philosophy—what cretinism! I have seen some drawings by him. Honey pump and some sort of bath tub—not for my taste."

The Flounder* and *The Meeting at Telgte

The Flounder (1977) takes the Grimm fairy tale of the *Fisherman and his Wife* as its starting point to tell a story about humanity and its hubris, which targets the different roles of men and women, and their respective contributions to progress and the possible decline of humanity.

At the same time it is about cooking, as the first sentence indicates: "Ilsebill added more salt." Cooking, eating and enjoying oneself play just as an important part in the works of Grass as eroticism, reflecting the culinary interests of the author. Nourishment, food and cooking were not only significant in the history of humanity for Grass, they also had communicative and symbolic significance.

Grass was a member of the Group 47, the influential literary association to which he read his as yet uncompleted *Tin Drum* in 1958. He produced an extraordinary tribute to this group with his key novel *The Meeting at Telgte* (1979). He set the "meeting" in the Baroque era, more precisely in the year 1647. The setting of the meeting was not accidental. The intended parallels to the 1950s were clear. The issue in the two eras, from Grass's point of view, was to find an orientation and a grasp of events amidst the confusion and violence of the times through the means of poetic art, to make sense of what had happened and find a solution.

In the novel, travelling poets from across Europe and every corner of stricken Germany, torn apart by the brutal, destructive campaigns of the Thirty Years War (1618-48), meet with the deep desire of doing something for peace. The invitation has been extended by Simon Dach, the Chair of Poetry at the Albertina University in Königsberg. Dach represents the organiser of the Group 47, Hans Werner Richter, to whom the book was dedicated. Grass also clearly modelled other members of the Group 47 in creating the other characters, which he depicted at the same time with great knowledge of their historical and artistic significance.

Grass seems to have modelled the figure of Gelnhausen (Grimmelshausen) on himself. The bustling author of *Simplicius Simplicissimus*, the picaresque novel written by Grimmelshausen in 1668, ensures that the group finds accommodation in the Westphalian town of Telgte. The guesthouse they originally booked in Oesede is occupied by Swedish troops. In Telgte, which has remained cut off from the worst excesses of the Thirty Years War, Gelnhausen's love Libushka (the vagabond also dramatised in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*) makes her guesthouse available to them. Led by Simon Dach, the poets, some of whom have travelled with their publishers, present their manuscripts.

As with the Group 47, the texts they have brought are discussed and the state of the German language after 30 years of war is discussed. In between they eat and drink, and some of the younger ones spend their nights with the maids in the attic. After several entanglements and controversies, they agree on a joint call for peace.

Simon Dach refers in his concluding speech to "the hand with the pen" extending from the rubble. The image expresses the idea of language as a unifying force beyond all the religious and political, as well as literary, differences that tear the country and its people apart. The high value placed on language and its ability to promote understanding of life links Grass to the Baroque.

Grass's relationship with the SPD

Grass's social engagement was incompatible with political abstention. Beginning in 1961, he backed the election campaigns of Social Democratic Party leader Willy Brandt, maintaining close ties with him when he became German chancellor. In 1970, he accompanied Brandt to Poland and was a witness when Brandt kneeled at the memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto—a gesture that acquired symbolic significance in relation to the German leader's new Ostpolitik (orientation to the East). Grass understood this policy as a step towards reconciliation and gave it his firm support.

Grass was also drawn to the SPD due to his mistrust of revolutionary change. In his youth, he experienced indoctrination by the Nazis, and knew "communism" only in its degenerate Stalinist antithesis. This worldview was concretised when he spent several weeks working in a mining pit with petty Nazi officials, embittered Communist Party members and old Social Democrats.

He recounted, "In the potash works I learned to live without ideology. I still had the morning ceremonies of the Hitler youth in my ears, those Sunday attestations to the flag, swearing on blood and soil of course, and then there were the communists attempting to entice me with similar relics dragged out of the lumber room of their ideology. As a child who had already been burnt, I stuck carefully to my taciturn social democrats, who neither babbled of a thousand year Reich nor world revolution, who in

1946 had already hurled the remaining ideological ballast into the dustbin" (*Works*, vol. x, Darmstadt and Neuwied, 1987, p. 441).

Grass held firmly to the view throughout his life that society could only be changed gradually and in small steps. In May last year, he described himself in the previously cited interview with *Die Zeit* as a "life-affirming pessimist," who knows that one must act carefully. "Influencing people to change is a long road. But it must be traversed."

Despite this, his relationship with the SPD remained ambivalent. He only joined the party in 1982 and left 10 years later in protest when the SPD responded to a series of anti-immigrant clashes by restricting the right to asylum. In contrast to the SPD, which moved ever further to the right, Grass held firm to his democratic and anti-militarist convictions, even when he came under sustained attack.

This was evident in 1990 in his reaction to German reunification. In opposition to Brandt, who joined in and encouraged the nationalist fervour, Grass responded critically and with severe reservations.

Too Far Afield

Grass devoted his novel *Too Far Afield* (1995) to reunification, and it was among his best. It took place between the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification, drawing on German history since 1848.

Grass did not consider reunification to be the result of a movement from below, driven by the people, but the result of a bureaucratic initiative by the GDR (East Germany) state apparatus. He placed German reunification in 1990 in continuity with the founding of the German Reich in 1871 under the leadership of Bismarck and his police-military bureaucracy. In this respect, he based himself on German writer Theodor Fontane (*Effie Briest* and others), who viewed the founding of the German Reich with increasing criticism in his novels.

Grass drew a parallel between the omnipresence and arrogance of the privileged, the old class of nobles and a rising layer of newly enriched businessmen, bankers, traders and speculators attacked by Fontane, and the bargain hunters, speculators and banks that made use of German unification to launch an aggressive campaign of enrichment, and with the help of the Treuhand (the agency that privatised East German enterprises from 1990 to 1994), strengthened their control over the land, property and businesses in the East.

The protagonists of the novel are the former GDR citizen Theo Wuttke, one-time lecturer for the GDR's cultural league dedicated to Theodor Fontane, and now an administrator in the Treuhand. Wuttke still identifies with Fontane, responds to the nickname "Fonty," and has a "round the clock shadow" and long-time spy, Hoftaller, also modelled on a historical figure—a Prussian secret police agent in the 19th century. They walk together through Berlin, the Brandenburg Mark, the coalfields of the Lausitz (a region in Germany and Poland), engaged in disputes over Fontane's work, strongly disagreeing over the actors in the reunification process, their ideological weapons—and their victims, who Grass overwhelmingly identifies as the population of the former GDR.

A key scene in *Too Far Afield* is the wedding of Fonty's daughter in the East Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg shortly after the currency union, bringing together all the relatives from the East and West.

Fonty's son Friedel, who stayed in the West after the wall was built and joined in the 1968 student movement with Mao's handbook and distributed Che Guevara posters, before later rising to head a theological publishing house, delivers fiery speeches against "these criminals" in the East, who ruined the youth and about the guilt borne by GDR writers and intellectuals, because they had served the "unjust naton". But then it turns out that Friedel, like many other predators in the West, is merely concerned with cashing in—in his case realising the property rights of his publishing house on the premises of the former head office of his publishing hourse in Magdeburg.

Fonty's future son-in-law, an obnoxious construction businessman from the West, is of the opinion that "from beginning to end the people in the GDR lived as if in a concentration camp," and comes to the conclusion that the market for land in Mecklenburg is totally underdeveloped due to the command-and-control economy.

As a result of his criticisms of reunification, Grass provoked a storm of protest from the mainstream media and their cultural pages. They attacked Grass like a pack of dogs, accusing him of trivialising the crimes of the GDR regime and the suffering of its victims. Disappointingly, well-known literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki savaged the book on the front page of *Der Spiegel*.

In reality, the novel—in keeping with its entire logic—contains a sharp critique of the police state methods used by the Stalinist regime in the GDR. At the same time, Grass provided a drastic and vivid portrayal of German society after reunification: society is not harmoniously united, but more deeply divided socially than ever before, the unity is only a straitjacket imposed by the state from above.

Looking back at the fierce disputes over his book, Günter Grass acknowledged in an interview with *Die Zeit* in 2009 that the "defeatism" of which he had been accused at the time had been outdone by reality. "What we are now experiencing as the great financial crisis had already begun to appear then as predatory capitalism."

A timeless subject of *Too Far Afield* is the role and responsibility of writers, and intellectuals and other artists. Grass defends artists and writers like Christa Wolf, East German critic and novelist, in a very principled and humane manner against the destructive ideological offensive of the Western victors.

Grass, however, was ruthless in his judgement of the bootlicking lackeys of the Stalinist bureaucracy such as Herman Kant, the former president of the GDR writers' association.

Against the stream

Grass drew closer to the SPD once again at the end of the 1990s. He supported Gerhard Schröder's election campaigns in 1998, 2002 and 2005, and maintained close personal contact with him. In 1999, after winning the Nobel Prize, Grass even justified the Kosovo war, and later signed a statement defending the Hartz social welfare "reforms." But this did not lead to any respite in his conflicts with the ruling elite and its turn towards militarism, which Grass vehemently opposed.

In 2003, for example, he gave an impassioned speech against the US-led Iraq war, which he branded as "violating international law," "illegality of the most powerful" and a "remnant from a barbaric age." "Scarred, powerless but full of wrath, we witness the moral decline of the once dominant world power, full in the knowledge that organised madness certainly has one consequence: the encouragement of the growth of terrorism, further violence and counter-violence," Grass said at the time in a clear anticipation of the future course of developments.

He complained that the United States was becoming a caricature of itself, and protested "against the brutally applied lawlessness of the strongest, against the restriction of freedom of speech, against a policy of providing information that is comparable to totalitarian states, and against the cynical calculation that the deaths of many thousands of women and children is acceptable when the realisation of economic interests and power politics is involved."

At the time, the Schröder government opposed German participation in

the Iraq war, which Grass incorrectly interpreted as a principled opposition to war. But when in 2006 he reported in his memoirs *Peeling the Onion* that at the end of the Second World War, he joined the Waffen SS as a 17-year-old, he came under attack from the pack of press hounds, as well as the SPD.

We commented at the time, "The attacks on Grass are both demagogic and malicious. They bear no relation to the facts and are clearly politically and ideologically motivated. In his early novels, Grass confronted the complacent and conservative society of postwar Germany, which employed high-ranking Nazis in leading state posts, with a frank picture of the Third Reich. … There were those who never forgave Grass for what he wrote, and he made life-long enemies. It is no coincidence that the most virulent attacks on Grass now come from right-wing and conservative circles. All those whose complacency and self-righteousness was shaken by Grass are now howling triumphantly. Finally, the chorus brays, the world-famous writer has been toppled from his pedestal. He had no right to criticize us and depict our deficiencies."

When the 84-year-old then published the prose poem "What Must Be Said" in 2012, accusing the nuclear power Israel of endangering the already shaky world peace with its threats against Iran, the attacks increased to an ear-splitting din. The flood of name-calling, slanders and insults flowing even from so-called serious media outlets directed against the world renowned author surpassed anything previously seen. He was denounced as an anti-Semite whose work belonged in the press of the neo-fascist German National Party (NPD) and was compared with Hitler's propaganda minister Josef Goebbels.

Grass was not intimidated. In his last interview to the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* on March 21, he sharply attacked the Western powers' policy on Ukraine. "We run the risk of committing the same mistakes as previously," he warned. "Without being conscious of it, we could stumble straight into another world war, as if we were sleepwalking."