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Some Reflections on The Passing of Günter Grass (1927-2015)

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Even since he burst on to the scene with Die Blechtrommel in 1959, Günter Grass was the object of scholarly attention, particularly among Germanists in the United States and Great Britain, where his impassioned intellectual and writerly engagement with the burning issues of the day was often more fervently admired than in his native Germany. Without a doubt, this fascination with a writer whose public presence often appeared to be as outsized as his most famous protagonist Oskar's physical form was diminutive—and just as compelling—will continue for some time to come.

Before this academic analysis of his legacy begins, however, those of us who grew up with Grass—reading him, discussing him with students, colleagues, and friends, or writing on him—will most likely be reflecting more generally on what he meant, for his readers in Germany and across the world, and for us as literary scholars. An era has passed, and it seems appropriate to pause for a moment to consider that.

Over the years, I have been privileged to work with many excellent Grass scholars. In our Cambridge Companion to Günter Grass (2009), I had contributions from Julian Preece, Frank Finlay, Patrick O'Neill, Peter Arnds, Katharina Hall, Helen Finch, Rebecca Braun, Monika Shafi, Stephen Brockmann, Karen Leeder, Richard Erich Schade, David Barnett, Roger Hillman, and Stuart Parkes, and there are plenty of others who have had a very significant impact over the decades. They include John Reddick, Frank Brunssen, Keith Bullivant, Rob Burns, Wilfried van der Will, Manfred Durzak, A.L. Willson, Richard H. Lawson, Ann Mason, Siegfried Mews, Volker Neuhaus, Judith

Ryan, Heinrich Vormweg, Andrew Weber, and many more besides. These friends and colleagues will have their own responses to Grass's death, but I hope that I may be allowed to offer some loosely connected thoughts on what Grass meant to me, and to speculate in an unashamedly non-scholarly fashion on some broader topics that the passing of this dominant—some would say, dominating—figure of postwar German culture might prompt us to consider.

Unlike most Grass scholars, I came to Günter Grass not through Die Blechtrommel, but through his fiction of the 1960s and 1970s. I am grateful to Michael Minden and Peter Hutchinson at Cambridge, who nurtured my interest in Grass's overtly political interventions, including örtlich betäubt (1969) and Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke (1971), which subsequently featured heavily in my Ph.D. What attracted me to Grass was the aspect of performance. It was the early mid-1990s, and my generation of young academics was interested not just in Judith Butler but also in the growth of celebrity culture. I wanted to understand better how Grass and other writers resisted but also coopted the market, how they created and deployed literary and public personae, and how these personae related to what we still quaintly thought of as the "real person." My dissertation was on authorial self-presentation in Grass, Martin Walser, and Uwe Johnson. Recently, my colleague at Lancaster Rebecca Braun has done more sophisticated work on celebrity, and on Grass's insertion of his private and public selves into his fiction.

In Great Britain, as in the United States and elsewhere in Anglophone scholarship, there were three relatively distinct forms of scholarly engagement with Grass. In the mid-1970s, John Reddick's seminal The Danzig Trilogy emphasized the writer's artistic

genius, his aesthetic mastery, and indefatigable wordplay, as did Hanspeter Brode, in German, in Günter Grass (1979). Several decades later, Julian Preece would continue this biographical focus on the interplay between personality, publications, and politics in The Life and Work of Günter Grass (2004), just as Volker Neuhaus and Heinrich Vormweg did in German. In the 1980s, Keith Bullivant, Wilfried van der Will, and Stuart Parkes, who had become interested in cultural studies and in the connection between writing and political discourse, focused to a greater extent, and generally approvingly, on Grass as public intellectual and activist. It would not be controversial to claim that these scholars were drawn to Grass in part because he embodied a form of writerly resistance to power that they felt was woefully absent during the Thatcher years. For my generation, more strongly influenced by poststructuralist and postmodernist theory, the emphasis on—indeed celebration of—the author felt suspect. This skepticism about Grass's claim to draw legitimacy from his writing in order to intervene in political debates and discourse, and about the construction of his public persona, still divides Grass scholars. On the one hand, there are those who applaud Grass's interventions while conceding that he was occasionally a maverick and, on the other, those who wonder whether the element of self-stylization, even self-monumentalization, always dominated.

David Barnett, Karen Leeder, Peter Arnds, and Andrew Weber reminded us that Grass was also a playwright and a poet—as did Dieter Stolz in German—and that his art belonged to world literature as well, responding to but also influencing global genres such as magical realism as well as non-German authors such as Salman Rushdie. And there was always an intense interaction with colleagues in the US, where similar debates on Grass's creativity, and on role and responsibility of the politically engaged writer,

were taking place. Siegfried Mews's magisterial review of Anglophone and German-language secondary literature from Günter Grass and His Critics: From The Tin Drum to Crabwalk (2008) gives a far more comprehensive account of this global scholarly reception than could ever be possible here. (And there is also of course a lively debate on Grass in a range of other languages too).

For me, and most likely for many others working on postwar and contemporary German fiction, Grass was not only a fascinating case study in the writer as public intellectual or in the possibilities of a politically engaged literature. He in some sense also embodied postwar German literature. It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that it often felt impossible to imagine German writing after 1945 without Grass—to imagine how it might have turned out if he had not been there. Even when we noted that his work had become less popular, or perhaps never again achieved the brilliance of Die Blechtrommel (a continuing debate…), or when we noted his occasional publishing breaks or absences from public view, we always presumed his centrality to postwar German letters. Grass was always more than Grass—we're back to the debate on personality and artistic genius, and on the construction of the author's public persona and performance—and it seemed to be just too big a counterfactual to think where our research might have strayed if he had not been there repeatedly to call us back.

At the same time, of course, reading Grass over the years has also been a great source of pleasure, and writing about him was never a burden. Grass's work offers multiple points of entry, and it has always been a productive stimulus to think about Germany, Germans, and their place in the world.

It is in this spirit that I want to forego the customary account of Grass's many and varied artistic achievements and political interventions—since his death there have been plenty of obituaries and musings on his legacy—and devote the remaining pages of this article to three broad topics relating to Germany and to Anglophone German Studies that Grass's death causes me to reflect on.

First—and this is perhaps self-evident—Grass's death confirms that we are now definitively in the post-postwar era that was heralded with great anticipation at the time of German unification in 1990 but which has taken some time to actually arrive. Grass—along with Martin Walser, who like Grass was born in 1927, and Christa Wolf, who died just over three years ago in December 2011—was a member of the Flakhelfer generation which, as Dirk Moses reminds us, was responsible for the "discursive democratization" of the Federal Republic,[1] with East German writers born around the same time playing a similarly vital role in speaking out for antifascism and liberalization in the GDR. Grass's passing—with Wolf's—signals what was already obvious, namely that this generation, which often appeared to dominate culture and politics in both parts of Germany, and often even since 1990, is no more and that the influence it exercised for so long must surely wane.

It can be speculated whether Germany will now have a more routine sequence of generations. In the "old" Federal Republic, 68ers, 78ers, and 89ers all complained of the impossibility of emerging from the shadow of the wartime cohort. Perhaps we will see less of the intensive engagement with fathers and grandfathers than we have witnessed over since the 1970s, and especially during the last twenty years, in a multitude of better

and not so well known novels and films. And maybe we will see a less pronounced fascination with the Nazi past.

As a scholar whose bread and butter has long been postwar German culture's engagement with the Nazi past, what themes should I be looking at now? For me, the fading of Grass's generation bolsters my awareness that there are a host of themes other than the Nazi past that demand our attention.

The huge demographic change that Germany has undergone since the early 1990s is now becoming inescapably apparent in German-language culture. Even on its publication in 2010, Grass's last novel Grimms Wörter immediately appeared quaint, if not eccentric, it seems to me, in its attempt to resuscitate a German cultural tradition going back to the Brothers Grimm (with Grass himself as the twentieth-century successor to these giants of German Letters!). The author's pantheon of German writers and thinkers—Grass pictures himself sitting at the Royal Prussian Academy with revenants including Hegel, Leibniz, Herder, and Fichte at Jacob Grimm's 1860 lecture "Über das Alter"—already appears oddly unrepresentative (or unreconstructed) in its exclusion of women, and of Jews. (No Moses Mendelssohn, and Bettina von Arnim is cast only as a caring companion, friend, or potential lover for male writers and intellectuals: "Ein Irrlicht und Energiebündel").[2] But what of—in a novel that also depicts Grass's journey through twentieth- and twenty-first century Germany—the ethnic diversity that has characterized the Federal Republic since the late 1950s, and even before if we think of immigration of French Huguenots to Prussia in the late seventeenth century, or of Polish speakers to the Ruhr in the 1870s? In the five years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Federal Republic received 1.9 million, 1.5 million, 1.3 million, 1.1 million, and 1.1

million migrants, producing net influxes of 602,523, 782,071, 462,096, 314,998, and 397,935, or a total of over two and a half million between 1991 and 1995 inclusive.[3] These figures include ethnic Germans from East European countries, people with a Jewish background from the former Soviet Union, and some 350,000 refugees from the wars in the former Yugoslavia raging in the early 1990s. Even today, despite the tightening of its asylum laws, Germany accepts disproportionately more asylum seekers and refugees than other European countries, for example from the civil war in Syria.

Viewed from this perspective, Grass—despite his own transnational background—may appear to have been surprisingly blind to the transformation of the Federal Republic after 1990. Even his relentless campaigning for the preservation of postwar Germany's liberal asylum laws—the constitutional amendment article 16a restricting the right to asylum and the right to appeal, was passed in 1993—oftentimes seemed to presume a "core" ethnic German identity, forever anchored in the Nazi past. (A "negative nationalism," therefore?). Jan-Werner Müller makes this argument very plausibly in his Another Country: German Intellectuals, Unification, and National Identity (2000).[4] In recent decades, Germanists—especially in the US and the UK—have done excellent work on minorities in Germany, and especially on ethnic minority writers and intellectuals, but the Federal Republic's population is now so very diverse that we may need to rethink even more radically whether the distinction between minority and majority holds in the same way as before, and how we approach issues of identity, privilege, and historical memory. (The population of the Federal Republic is also aging very rapidly, which in its turn has very serious consequences for political discourse and forms of culture).

Globalization and transnationalism—if we use the second term as a shorthand for the massively increased flow of products, people, and ideas across borders in recent years—also challenge the assumption of a coherent national space or culture (or what Grass might have preferred to call a Kulturnation). The recent growth of interest in World Literature, developing Goethe's term theoretically, promises not only to redefine "national literatures" but also to focus our attention on the way texts and writers circulate beyond national borders along unpredictable paths of influence and reception but also via more integrated systems of acquisition, distribution, and marketing. Grass as "world author"—how might we look at him differently through this lens, and how might we think about German-language literature more generally if we see it as part of a global network of translated or at least transisting texts? How does Grass fit into the emerging interest in German Studies, and in comparative and world literatures, in multilingualism (for example Yasemin Yildiz's 2012 book Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition)? It has long been recognized that Grass's work displays significant traces of other languages, histories and cultures, particularly Polish and Kashubian.

The second theme that Grass's death causes me to reflect on is another—but related—form of diversity. Changes in the literary market, technology, and reading habits now make it difficult to imagine that a select few writers could ever again dominate "German letters" as Grass and a handful of his peers did at least until the 1980s. Over the last several decades, colleagues have done important work in demonstrating the rich variety of postwar German-language writing beyond the white male canon that had previously been taken to be its sum total. Women writers and ethnic minority authors are

now firmly established as part of the range of German-language literatures. But today's variety is not just the expression of a long overdue democratization of the production, marketing, and reception of German-language writing. It is also a consequence of the acceleration effect of contemporary capitalism and contemporary consumer culture. Grass's plea in 1999 for the introduction of a course "zur Erlernung der Langsamkeit" in all schools summarizes his repudiation of the dizzying pace of modern existence but perhaps also betrays his worry that he too will soon be redundant.[5] Certainly, we live in a world in which celebrity is far more common but also far more ephemeral. As scholars, how do we make sense of forms of diversity that are not to do with the identity of particular (marginalized) groups but with the dominant mechanisms of production and consumption? One effect of Germany's postwall "normalization" may be its ever closer alignment with an increasingly globalized market and the resulting fragmentation—invoking the tension between diversity and fragmentation—of German-language literature, as readers choose between ever more and ever-changing "cultural offerings." For scholars, there is something liberating about this unending diversity—it breaks down the old hierarchies and challenges the notion of a national literary space—but it also requires new approaches and new questions.

Finally, Grass's demise causes us to consider whether he might have been among the very last European public intellectuals. In speeches and essays from the early 1990s onwards, he repeatedly framed himself as redundant and obsolete. In his 1992 self-portrait "Selbst mit Hut und Unke," Grass is the elderly artist warning in vain of coming disasters alongside the toad (from his 1992 novel Unkenrufe).[6] In Ein weites Feld, his authorial alter ego is described as "ein wenig vorgestrig,"[7] and in Im Krebsgang he is the

"Alte" (throughout), and elsewhere he presents himself as a "Dinosaurier" or the "letzte Mohikaner."[8] The second installment of his valedictory trilogy Die Box (2008)—following Beim Häuten der Zwiebel (2006), which revealed his service in the Waffen SS, and preceding Grimms Wörter—concludes with the deliciously comic image of Grass being devoured by his offspring:

> wie während der Steinzeit, vor geschätzt zwölftausend Jahren, weil Hungersnot herrschte, auf acht kleinen Fotos die Söhne und Töchter als Horde den Vater – vermutlich auf seinen Wunsch – mit ihren Äxten, gehauen aus Feuerstein, erschlugen, mit Faustkeilen der Länge nach öffneten, das Herz, die Leber, die Nieren, die Milz und den Magen, dann sein Gedärm herausnahmen, ihn in Teile zerlegten und Stück für Stück über Glut langsam gar und knusprig werden ließen, worauf auf dem letzten der Fotos alle satt und zufrieden.[9]

And in Unterwegs von Deutschland nach Deutschland, Grass's first diary entry on New Year's Day 1990 has him tending his garden in Portugal far from the tumultuous events reshaping German society.[10]

Grass had long styled himself in the tradition of the socially engaged, politically committed European public intellectual—his 1965 election speech "Ich klage an," as has often been noted, recalled Zola's "J'accuse." But his last significant published work, the poem "Was gesagt werden muss," was striking not only on account of its provocative attack on Israel but also because of just how out-of-touch its "lyrical I" appears. In this

explicitly self-reflexive poem, which appeared on 4 April, 2012 in the Süddeutsche Zeitung, La Repubblica und El País, Grass presents himself as "gealtert und mit letzter Tinte"[11]—Titanic wondered facetiously whether the elderly author still had "Tinte auf dem Füller"[12]—but this self-irony is probably not enough to offset the reader's perplexity at the dominant tone of self-aggrandizement. Perhaps Grass was "in der Tinte gesessen," or maybe he had "Tinte gesoffen." Whatever the case, the resonant "I" that opens five of the poem's nine stanzas—Grass the living person but also Grass the moralische Instanz—feels oddly quaint, even anachronistic. In the age of Twitter, Facebook, and the democratization of "public opinion," Grass's insistence that he be heard suggests a belief in his authority—the white European male, even without "Tinte auf dem Füller"—that surely few others, of subsequent generations, would share. Grass's brand of engaged intellectual may indeed be redundant, and we most likely welcome the questioning of presumed authority, but we are still not quite sure where—if not in the writing of "great authors"—serious debate on the issues of the day now takes place.

Günter Grass's death marks the passing of an era. For more than half a century, in essays, speeches, and above all literary fiction, Grass commented on a postwar Germany that today seems to be rapidly becoming rapidly "historical to itself," to misappropriate Goethe. The challenge for Grass scholars such as myself, it seems to me, will be to contextualize his legacy in relation to the local and global interactions—and the interaction between the local and the global—that are reshaping the Federal Republic's self-understanding and its place in the world.

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[1] A. Dirk Moses, German Intellectuals and The Nazi Past (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 50.

[2] Günter Grass, Grimms Wörter: Eine Liebeserklärung (Göttingen: Steidl, 2010), 52.

[3] Statistisches Bundesamt, "Migration between Germany and foreign countries 1991 to 2013." Online: https://www.destatis.de/EN/FactsFigures/SocietyState/Population/Migration/Tables/MigrationTotal.html. Checked May 5, 2015.

[4] Jan Werner Müller, Another Country. German. Intellectuals, Unification and National Identity **(**New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 82.

[5] Günter Grass, "Der lernende Lehrer," Die Zeit, May 20, 1999. Online at: http://www.zeit.de/1999/21/199921.lehrer_.xml. Checked May 5, 2015.

[6] See http://www.ludwiggalerie.de/site/content/exhibition/past_exhibitions/index_eng.html#myAnchor_15. Checked Checked May 5, 2015

[7] Günter Grass, Ein weites Feld, in Grass, Werkausgabe, vol. 13, ed. Volker Neuhaus and Daniela Hermes (Göttingen: Steidl, 1997), 591.

[8] Günter Grass, "Zwischen den Stühlen." in Günter Grass, Essays und Reden IV. 1997-2007 (Göttingen: Steidl, 2008), 34-37, here 36. Jens has been suffering from dementia since 2004 and is frequently cited in debates on assisted suicide, having been an active proponent of the right to die.

[9] Günter Grass, Die Box. Dunkelkammergeschichten (Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 2008), 191.

[10] Günter Grass, Unterwegs von Deutschland nach Deutschland (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009), 17.

[11] The full text of the poem can be found on the website of the Süddeutsche Zeitung: http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/gedicht-zum-konflikt-zwischen-israel-und-iran-was-gesagt-werden-muss-1.1325809. Checked May 5, 2015

[12] http://www.titanic-magazin.de/newsticker.html?&tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=6&cHash=219d6ceb063e996edbb79fe989a2eb94. Checked May 5, 2015. I am grateful to Anja Henebury for drawing my attention to this.