

NARRATIVE TRANSMUTATION OF HISTORY INTO FICTION

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Günter Grass challenges the hegemony of historians over literary writers in representing the past and rejects the primacy of so called factual over fictional historical accounts. He points out that both types of writers base their work on subjective perceptions of certain situations, which they then arrange in the form of the story. He goes so far as to assert that fiction is superior in depicting history because its very mode acknowledges the relativity of its perspective. He always supplements the historical facts with his imagination. By redefining the relation of fiction to reality, Grass can proceed to erase the line between his writing and conventional historiography. Rejecting the prosaic nature of conventional history books, Grass resorts to his own mode of explanation for historical processes, all the while making explicit the subjectivity of his own point of view. This paper analyzes how Günter Grass portrays German history, particularly the history of Danzig during World Wars, in his novel *The Tin Drum* (1959) through the deflected perspective of his epic protagonist Oskar Matzerath. It tries understand how Günter Grass transmutes history in to fiction primarily by contrasting it with Oskar's life.

Any type of history is a processed narrative. It is mainly achieved by subjectivity, the element which postmodern historians highlighted in depicting history. Oskar Matzerath is purely a creation of Grass's imagination Nevertheless, the background, the era in which he lives, is not an imaginary period. It was the most painful era of history and humanity. Grass takes us to the major period of German history spanning the World Wars. He documents even the minute details of that period in the novel with great precision. Every major event in the novel is related to the relevant period in history.

There are many historical elements incorporated in the story. The story of Oskar can be a personalized history of Grass himself. It highlights an 'absent' history, an alternative experience which most of the German citizens underwent in their lives. Alternative versions of official history, or 'apocryphal history', to use Brain McHale's term in *Postmodernist Fiction*, are complicated (90). There are histories corresponding to different perspectives. As Dorrit Cohn remarks in her *The Distinction of Fiction*, alternative histories can be either socio-politically or aesthetically inspired. In other words, they require interpretations "either as ideological strategies or as artistic games" (90). *The Tin Drum* retells the history of the calamities suffered by the people who lived in Germany during the World War.

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The novel sequence ‘Danzig Trilogy’ which included *The Tin Drum*, *Cat and Mouse* and *Dog Years*, was written in order to ‘immortalize the lost homeland’ – Danzig, today Gdansk. One can undoubtedly say that if there is a geographic centre to Günter Grass’s fiction it is the city of Danzig. As Nicole A Thesz points out, Danzig for Grass is a location in which memories and myths converge. It is the place where Grass was born in 1927. The whole novel is a fable of the mythical and diminutive Oskar Matzerath’s life in the ‘Free City of Danzig’, Germany through World War II. The ‘Free City of Danzig’ was a semi-autonomous city-state that existed between 1920 and 1939, comprising the Baltic Sea Port of Danzig and the surrounding area. In accordance with the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, the Free city was created on 10 January 1920. It was created in order to give Poland sufficient access to the sea and to weaken Germany while at the same time recognizing that its population was mainly German.

There is a strong bond between history and geography in *The Tin Drum*. He successfully integrates history and territory through his leading characters. As Yi-Fu Tuan observes in his *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* the focus on the Danzig region demonstrates the “affective bond between people and place” (4). In the novels of Grass Danzig is a place “where the environment has become the carrier of emotionally charged events” (93). Oskar’s memories of Danzig are always connected to his grandmother Anna Bronski and her ‘protective skirts’. In his depiction of the grandmother and her stories, Grass reveals another prominent group in Danzig, other than Poles and Germans – Kashubians. Anna represents the Kashubian minority of the Danzig region, providing the agricultural backdrop to the German-Polish power struggle over the city.

Even though the existence and the very history of Danzig are vivid in Oskar’s memory and narration, every important moment of that place can be traced from the novel. Since it is a city on the Baltic coast and a major port, it had to witness many encounters between the natives and the foreigners. Through Herbert Truczinski’s story, Oskar unravels the tensions that existed in that borderland. Herbert Truczinski, a waiter in the Sweden Bar usually separated brawlers at the harbor and “he would come home in an ambulance once or twice a month involuntarily but free of charge” (TD 161). His body bears the scars of this borderland struggle. Oskar remembers that his friend’s back “was covered with thick scars which interrupted the vegetation, effaced the freckles. Multi-coloured, ranging from blue-black to greenish-white, they formed creases and itched when the weather changed” (TD 162). He studies Herbert’s scarred back, a ‘Land Shift’ or a “map of irreconcilable animosities” (TD 164). This is a rather drastic example of what Edward Ralph and Yi Fu Tuan mean when they evoke the “sense of place”, a notion that bridges space, human experience and history. In Danzig’s history, “the sense of place” is marked by Germany’s imperial aspirations.

Grass also mentions the history of the Jews in the interwar period in Danzig. The riots of *Kristallnacht* on November 30 are convincingly depicted in the novel. The events come out through the story of the toyshop owner Markus. *Kristallnacht* or the Night of Broken Glass was an anti-Jewish program in Germany from the 9th until the 10th of November 1938. In a coordinated attack on Jewish People and their property, 91 Jews were killed and 25,000 to 30,000 were arrested and placed in concentration camps. At least 267 synagogues were destroyed

and thousands of homes and business shops were ransacked. The *Kristallnacht* was triggered by the assassination in Paris of a German diplomat Ernst von Rath by Herschel Grynszpan, a German-born Polish Jew. While the assassination of Rath served as a pretext for the attacks, the *Kristallnacht* was part of a broader racial policy of Nazi Germany including anti-Semitism and persecution of the Jews.

The vexed memories of racial injustice never dominate the novelistic discourse of Grass, but he incorporates many of such incidents in his novels. By employing the ingenious device of parody and irony he succeeds in revealing the cruelty of Nazi Germans during the period. The final chapter of the first book, "Faith, Hope, Love" gives an account of *Kristallnacht*. The chapter gives us the story of the drunken trumpeter named Meyn. He was a member of the Danzig SA Mob that smashes and plunders Jewish-owned shops and houses during the so called *Kristallnacht*. He is a fine musician. He kills his four pet cats and is expelled from the SA Mob for cruelty to animals.

There was once an SA man who did four cats in with a poker. But because the cats were not all -the -way dead, they gave him away and a watchmaker reported him. The case came up for trial and the SA man had to play a fine. But the matter was also discussed in the SA and the SA man was expelled from the SA for conduct unbecoming a storm trooper. Even his conspicuous bravery on the Crystal Night, when he helped set fire to the Langfuhr synagogue in Michaelisweg, . . . could not halt his expulsion from the Mounted SA. For inhuman cruelty to animals he was stricken from the membership list. (TD 185)

Thus, the incident he selects from each historical moment of Germany in the World War era is an implied critique of his own period.

He again describes the losses on the Crystal Night. It ends the life of one of his favorite friends, Sigismund Markus, the toyshop owner. He sold Oskar tin drums lacquered red and white. Markus commits suicide in the night because he wants to escape from the rage of Nazi Germans. When the infuriated mob breaks into his office in the toyshop, it is not locked, and they find him "beyond being spoken to, beyond being hurt or humiliated" (TD 187). Oskar incorporates the events into his life. "... As for me they took away my toy merchant, wishing with him to banish all toys from the world" (TD 190). Oskar anticipates a harder life waiting for him because he is a drummer by profession and is neither able nor willing to live without a drum.

The invasion of Normandy is also incorporated beautifully into the novel with Oskar's European Tour with Bebra. He is there in France during the Normandy invasion. The invasion of Normandy was the invasion and establishment of Allied Forces in Normandy, France, during Operation Overlord in World War II. The invasion was the largest amphibious operation in history. Roswitha Raguna, Oskar's mistress, is killed in the massive air attacks on 6 June 1944, which is a terrible shock for him and this prompts his return to his native city Danzig.

Historical events and documentary evidences are used within the framework of the story and incorporated in it are other concocted private stories. However, they do not deny the official historical records. However, by offering "so many different stories" they refuse any claim to absolute truth in the official versions. His subjective version of the history of the defenders of the

Polish Post Office in 1939 supplements historical facts in order to give a more comprehensive account of historical process and of the continuum between the lived experience and recorded history.

After the Second World War Poland regained its independence and Danzig became the Free City of Danzig, an independent quasi-state under the auspices of the League of Nations with its external affairs largely under Polish control. Half of the population in the Danzig Free State was German and they favored the reincorporation of Danzig into Germany. In the early 1930's the local Nazi Party capitalized on these pro-German sentiments. We get a glimpse of these anti-Polish sentiments in the words of Markus when he requests Agnes to stop the illegal relationship with Jan Bronksi:

'Dont do it no more with Bronski, seeing he's in the Polish Post Office. He's with the Poles, that's no good. Don't bet on the Poles; if you gotta bet on somebody, bet on the Germans, they're coming up, may be sooner may be later. And suppose they are on top and Mrs. Matzerath is still betting on Bronski.... (TD 91)

Grass sets up a mosaic work to enable the readers to get the whole scenario into perspective. He selects bits from important historical moments and finally the readers are drawn towards the final blaze - Annexation of Danzig to Germany during the interwar period.

History books say that German troops removed Polish insignia at the Polish- Danzig border near Zoppot on 1st September 1939. World War II began with the shelling of the Westerplatte on 1st September 1939. Polish Civilian Post office employees defended the Polish Post office for 15 hours. They were captured and executed by the German forces. Grass pictures this event which is considered the beginning of the Second World War with a unique kind of imagination. This incident is connected to Oskar's toy drum and his presumptive father Jan Bronski. He succeeds in sketching this historical moment without departing from the factuality of history. On that particular day Oskar forces Jan Bronski to reenter the Polish post office after his work. As the novel has it, Jan is forced to take part in fight of the Polish Defenders. Jan and Oskar are engaged in a card game in the post office when a furious fight is going on around them. The card game played among Jan, Oskar and Kobyella in the shelter of a windowless room continues up to the surrender of Polish Defenders. Jan and Oskar play skate with Kobyella, although the janitor is increasingly weak and they have to prop the cards up in his hands. Jan becomes disoriented calling Oskar "Agnes" and Kobyella "Matzerath". Finally, there is a lull in the fighting outside and Kobyella expires in the middle of the hand, depriving Jan of a sure-thing grand slam.

Grass also draws our attention to the defeat of the Germans and the arrival of the Russians. The plight of the Germans in their burning cities also finds adequate expression in the chapter "The Ant Trail". After the German defeat all the major places in Danzig are burned and demolished by the Russian army:

Hook Street, Long Street and Broad Street, Big Weaver Street and Little Weaver Street were in flames; Tobias Street, Hound Street, Old City, Ditch, Outer City, Ditch, the ramparts and Long Bridge, all were in flames. Built of wood, Crane Gate made a particularly fine blaze. In Breechesmaker Street, the fire had itself measured for several pairs of extra-loud breeches. The Church of St. Mary was burning inside and outside; festive light effects could be seen through its

ogival windows.... Butcher Street Smelled of burnt Sunday roast. The Municipal Theater was giving a premiere, a one – act play entitled. *The Firebug's Dream*. The town fathers decided to raise the fireman's wages retroactively after the fire. Holy Ghost Street was burning in the name of Holy Ghost.... (TD 370-371).

Oskar's narration of the burning and destruction of German cities after the Second World War is characterized by pervasive humour. Thus in *The Tin Drum*, everything is reported even though it is in a laconic tone.

Similarly, the rape of German women by Russian soldiers is confined to some cursory remarks. Grass is conscious and alert about not portraying the incidents of German suffering in a sentimental manner. He communicates the atrocities of the Russian soldiers by depicting the plight of Lina Greff. But he suddenly changes the scene of the rape of Lina Greff after brief humorous remarks about it.

In the inverted world of the Second World War, Polish immigrants take the place of Danzig Germans. All the properties that formerly belonged to Germans are handed over to the Polish people. The Matzerath shop and apartment are turned over to a man named Fajingold, a Polish victim of the Treblinka concentration camp. Thus, Grass remains an objective historian without being affected by particular historical moments.

Ervin Brody describes how the Holocaust is dealt with in *The Tin Drum*, not in all its horrific detail but in a personalized, yet meaningful way. He points out that even though the Holocaust is not the main theme of the novel, it is significant because of its strategic sensitivity as the background. Thus, Grass's muted irony distances the catastrophe of history and traces its effects largely in terms of private lives. Other than the toyshop owner Sigismund Markus, Grass diplomatically introduces another Jew in the novel, Fajingold. He is another whose life serves as a specimen of the lives of most of the Jewish Holocaust survivors.

When the destroyed eastern cities are handed over to the Polish people, Fajingold takes charge of Matzerath's grocery shop. He is all alone in this world, but behaves as though he is surrounded by a large family and cannot manage for one minute without their advice. When he sees the corpse of Matzerath he claps his hands over his head and calls:

..... not only Luba his wife, but his whole family into the cellar, and there is no doubt that he saw them all coming, for he called them by name: Luba, Lev, Jakub, Berek, Leon, Mendel, and Sonya. He explained to them all who it was lying there dead and went on to tell us that all those he had just summoned as well as his sister-in-law and her other brother-in-law who had five children had lain in the same way, before being taken to the crematoria of Treblinka, and the whole lot of them had been lying there – except for him because he had to strew lime on them. (TD 379)

This single reference to the Holocaust incident is sufficient to describe Jewish suffering and to point out the crimes perpetrated in the extermination camps of Chelmno, Treblinka, Auschwitz, Birkenav, Sobibor, Belzec and Majdanek.

To prevent the creation of an authoritative version of history, Grass tells us, Germans need historical accounts that include both their crimes and their tragedies. He never fails to acknowledge the brutality of the crimes of his nation and people towards the Jews and the Poles. Reflecting on the sixteenth anniversary of the German invasion of Poland, Grass recalls the 'injustice and the loss of Heimat' that had befallen millions of Germans – himself included – at the end of the war. He acknowledges that this suffering was a consequence of "the crimes that we German have committed" ("On Loss"152). He is also careful not to highlight German sufferings after their defeat in the Second World War. He tries to remain an objective historian unaffected by particular historical moments.

The third part of the novel focuses on the expulsion of Germans from East Central Europe. Grass's participatory history cannot dismiss the accounts of the sufferings of those Germans driven out of their homes in the East. This is the most painful era for the Germans because they have to leave their native place and also suffer the calamities of the World War simultaneously.

The mass flight and expulsion of German populations from their traditional homelands in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe was the aftereffect of the Second World War. After the final Soviet Offensive began in January 1945, hundreds of thousands of German people fled to the western part of Germany.

In this process, ten thousands of refugees were killed. The Allies bombarded German cities. Those who survived and could not escape encountered the Soviet Army, which captured the city on March 30, 1945. Danzig was heavily damaged and its remaining residents were forcibly expelled to post war Germany.

Historians have described the defeat and flight of Germans after the World War. Nevertheless, unlike a historian a novelist may tell more. It is easier for him to narrate two sides of the same coin without any preference for either side. Being a German, Grass could not be blind to the sufferings of Germans also. He depicts this process from the perspective of those who had endured flight and expulsion. He tactfully uses this situation to establish that Germans, too, had been victims of the Second World War and had suffered injustice and hardship. He uses these sufferings and expulsion to suggest that the crimes committed against Germans are perhaps comparable to the crimes committed by Nazi Germany against the Jews.

In the third part of the novel, Oskar moves with his widowed stepmother and their son to Dusseldorf. Fajingold, Polish Jew, became the owner of Matzerath's shop and apartment. Grass elaborately describes their journey from Danzig to West Germany. There are thirty-two other people in the freight car. Over the next four days, they are stopped repeatedly and robbed by Polish hoodlums. Along the way, Oskar grows three or four inches. The stretching is mostly in the legs; there is little change in the chest or head. His distorted physical condition is analogous to the deformed physical condition of his own motherland. Peter Arnds in his *Representation, Subversion, and Eugenics in Günter Grass's The Tin Drum* compares Oskar's physical state to Germany's ugliness. After the Second World War, Germany becomes physically fragmented into several chunks. Now Oskar, the deformed hunchback, represents and embodies Germany's postwar geographical and mental state.

The intentions of the historian and the novelist are entirely different. One intends to convey information about what did take place and the other intends to convey information about the human condition of very real people, often by means of invented characters. But both are interested in helping readers to understand the general human condition. *The Tin Drum* relates history in an indirect, yet meaningful way, through stories about individuals. The entire history is narrated by the one and only narrator Oskar. We learn about German history starting from 1899 through the 1950's almost exclusively through the context of the stories that involve Oskar himself or his acquaintances, friends and relatives. Any reader who is not familiar with German history of the time would in fact gain glimpses of some of the highpoints through cursory details of various aspects of the Second World War, the formation of Danzig, the holocaust, the Allied occupation and the early Federal Republic of Germany. *The Tin Drum* does not replace historical narratives or chronicles. But it complements documentary accounts, and reminds the reader of the limitations of the academic discipline of history.

Novelistic discourse can provide us with information regarding events which are unrecorded in historical chronicles. It can create an interior, alternative history by focusing on the ordinary lives and events which the historian's annals tend to disregard. This imaginative history of the novel runs parallel to official history and fills the gaps and fissures left by history proper. In this process the narrative becomes a comprehensible history. In *The Tin Drum* Grass achieves such a blend of fact and fiction, and novel and history.

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