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978-0-521-70019-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Gunter Grass

Edited by Stuart Taberner

Excerpt

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STUART TABERNER

Introduction

Just as the idea for this volume was being developed for the *Cambridge Companion* series in the summer of 2006 the dramatic news broke that Günter Grass, the internationally renowned, Nobel prize-winning author who was to be its subject, had admitted for the first time in public that he had been a member, aged seventeen, of the Waffen SS, the elite German army organisation notorious for its fanatical obedience to Hitler and its prominent role in Nazi atrocities. In Germany, Grass's critics rushed to denounce what they saw as his hypocrisy (after all, he had long been lecturing his compatriots on the need to confront their past openly), with conservative journalist and newspaper editor Joachim Fest memorably commenting that he would not buy a used car from 'this man', while his supporters leaped to his defence, claiming that his revelation, overdue though it might be, by no means invalidated more than half a century of vigorous campaigning for the embedding of democratic values in the post-fascist Federal Republic, Grass's unrelenting concern with the Nazi period in his literary works as far back as the publication of *The Tin Drum* in 1959, or his untiring agitation for freedom and human rights across the globe. Internationally, Grass's fellow authors mostly stood up for an esteemed colleague, pointing not only to his record of political activism and social engagement on causes ranging from environmentalism and the Third World to racism and social exclusion but also to the breadth of his achievements as a writer, poet, dramatist, artist and essayist.

In truth, it is likely that Grass's disclosure, printed in an interview on 12 August 2006 with the author in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in advance of the publication of his autobiographical work *Peeling the Onion*, will have little lasting or substantial impact on the way in which his work is read or, indeed, on the way in which the author's lifetime of social, political and cultural intervention as a public intellectual is evaluated. (It is worth noting that not all the contributors to the present volume agree with this prognosis for the impact of Grass's admission on interpretations of his

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work.) It was already well known that he had been seduced by Nazism as a boy and had wholeheartedly wished for Hitler to emerge victorious. In fact, at least since the early 1960s, Grass had transformed reflection on his own ‘biographical failure’ into a staple of his essays, speeches and literary texts. More probable is that the ‘Grass affair’ of 2006 will feature in academic discussion of the culture and society of the post-unification Federal Republic as a moment when conservatives challenged an iconic representative of the country’s ‘culture of contrition’¹ in the hope of undermining the centrality of repeatedly restated remorse to its presentation of its national identity. Alternatively, it may come to be seen as a moment when it became possible, just as the wartime generation was passing away, and reflecting the way Germans were now speaking differently about the Nazi era, to admit degrees of complicity without inviting immediate condemnation.

Nevertheless, the ‘Grass affair’ does give us pause for thought in assembling a volume such as this. Above all, we are prompted to reflect, perhaps more than might be customary in a book dedicated to the discussion of the artistic achievements of a contemporary author and written primarily for university undergraduates and graduate students, on the considerable differences of opinion that Grass provokes, and in fact had already always provoked even before his startling revelation. Or, more accurately, we may be prompted to consider the differences in the *parameters* within which literary scholars in particular frame their enquiries and the *criteria* according to which they assess the life and work of the author. Indeed, in the case of a renowned writer such as Grass, who has been exhaustively and authoritatively discussed in secondary literature, it may be that the impetus to explore the different perspectives from which critics approach his work is in any event a welcome development. If the readers to whom this book is addressed find that they recognise the frames of reference which its contributors bring to bear on their topics, they may be more able to generate their own insights or counter-arguments, identifying what the approach used in a given chapter is most suited to bring out – and what it may have missed or overlooked.

This volume, then, does not set out to present a series of essays which are uniform in either approach or in their assessment of Grass’s accomplishments – indeed, my previous paragraph presupposes diversity rather than homogeneity. Although the volume as a whole aims to address the breadth of his activities as an artist, writer, poet, dramatist and polemicist, its fifteen chapters exemplify different ways of framing an examination of Günter Grass’s life and work and thus offer, to their readers, a choice of perspectives and thereby the possibility of real engagement with the ongoing and ever-mutating project of exploring what Grass *is*.

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First and foremost, scholars have tended to relate Grass's artistic activities to his biography. Indeed, this is an approach that the author frequently invites, insofar as he makes specific reference to his own experiences of both National Socialism and the decades which followed the German defeat of 1945 and the establishment of the Federal Republic in 1949 (the autobiographical *Peeling the Onion* does this explicitly, of course, as does *My Century*, from 1999, a year-by-year fictionalisation of the period from 1900 in which the author's own life is frequently caught up following his birth in 1927). Thus, many of the chapters in this volume relate Grass's artistic works to his life. This includes his time as a child in Danzig, the Baltic port split off from Germany by the League of Nations after the First World War, before Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939, his adolescent enthusiasm for the Nazis, brief service in the German army (as we now know, in the Waffen SS), and his capture by the Americans in hospital in May 1945 in Marienbad (now Mariánské Lázně in the Czech Republic) and detention in the prisoner-of-war camp in Bad Aibling. With regard to the immediate postwar period, reference is frequently made to Grass's apprenticeship as a sculptor and painter at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art and The Academy of Fine Arts in West Berlin, his growing political awareness, travels to Italy, France and Spain, and to his instantaneous and wholly unanticipated fame following the publication of his first novel, *The Tin Drum*, in 1959. Relating to his life since the early 1960s, key biographical strands are identified such as his political campaigning on behalf of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and particularly its leader Willy Brandt, his disillusionment with party politics in West Germany, interest in environmental issues and the Third World, including travel in India in the mid-1970s and late 1980s, and his outspoken opposition to German unification in 1990 and many interventions in debates in Germany and beyond through to the present day.

This approach, which sees the 'truth value' of Grass's activities as a graphic artist, poet, dramatist, essayist and writer as guaranteed by his 'authentic' life-experience, generally brings with it a positive assessment of his work and foregrounds the importance of Grass as a person. Thus the emphasis is on his energetic and engaged spirit, his commitment to liberal causes, and to democratic principles, and his willingness to 'speak out' (or, to adapt the name of his 1988 mixed-media text *Zunge zeigen*, 'show his tongue') and, to paraphrase the title of his 1991 collection of essays *Gegen die verstreichende Zeit*, to write 'against the passing of time'.

Naturally, this approach has been challenged. On the one hand, to relate an artist's work so directly to his or her life – even, or perhaps especially, at the invitation of the author in question – appears to some scholars,

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including some in this collection, unduly to limit the range of interpretations that can be derived from aesthetic works to those which are ‘authorised’ by the artist or reducible to his or her ‘real life’. Art, it is argued, is always more than a lens through which we may glimpse the ‘truth’ of the artist’s life or glimpse his or her ‘intentions’. Moreover, such a ‘biographical reading’ might be considered to be overly generous, accepting the ‘truth’ of what the artist presents as ‘lived experience’ and endowing perspectives derived from an ‘authentic’ life-story with a certain, unassailable legitimacy. In *Peeling the Onion*, Grass’s fictional self declares that he is writing the book ‘because I want to have the last word’.² Some may feel that it is important to challenge this desire to frame the public reception of his life and work, all the more so following the revelation that his previous presentation of his biography had been incomplete.

A second approach to Grass, and one which is adopted by several chapters in this volume, is to focus on his work as an artist, dramatist, poet and writer and to evaluate individual texts or artefacts as *aesthetic constructs*. Here, the relationship between Grass’s artistic production and his biography assumes a lesser role. Instead, the emphasis is on the range of his endeavours, his varying proficiency in the different media in which he creates (e.g., drawing, drama, poetry, or fiction), and the internal aesthetic structure of individual works and the extent of their success, or otherwise, as works of art. Grass’s literary fiction may be examined, therefore, but the focus is just as likely to be on key poems such as ‘Kleckerburg’ from the 1967 collection *Cross-Examined*, or collections of poems, on individual sketches, etchings, or lithographs, or collections of these, or on dramatic works from an early ‘absurd’ or ‘poetic’ phase (the 1950s) or a second, ‘political’ phase (the 1960s). A case might be made, for example, to counter the oft repeated claim that Grass’s only outstanding literary text is *The Tin Drum*, or to argue for his competence as an artist or as a poet when others judge him to be a writer of fiction above all and only a secondary talent in relation to drawing, verse or drama. Alternatively, the emphasis might be on the various German traditions and artists which have shaped Grass’s work – German Baroque art and literature, Dürer, the picaresque novel, especially Grimmelshausen’s *Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1669), or Fontane, Brecht and Thomas Mann, to name but a few – on his place within the contemporary German literary landscape, or on his dialogue with international influences and non-German authors, for example, ‘magical realism’ and writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, John Irving or Salman Rushdie, and the manner in which he has come to be seen as part of a ‘global literature’.

Very often the focus might be on the different phases in Grass’s career. In relation to his literary output, for example, a first phase might be

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characterised by Grass's interest in the 1950s and 1960s, in the German past and West German politics and by his development of a unique aesthetic style. This would encompass his early indebtedness to expressionism and existentialism (also very marked in his first efforts as a graphic artist), his subsequent development as a Baroque storyteller in the so-called Danzig Trilogy (*The Tin Drum*, 1959; *Cat and Mouse*, 1961; and *Dog Years*, 1963), and his excursion into shorter prose fiction relating to contemporary political campaigns in *Local Anaesthetic* (1969) and *From the Diary of a Snail* (1972). A subsequent phase might be characterised by the extension of his concerns beyond Germany to the effects of world overpopulation, global poverty, the danger of nuclear catastrophe (particularly after the Chernobyl reactor explosion in 1986) and the environment in *Headbirths or The Germans Are Dying Out* (1980), *The Rat* (1986), *Show Your Tongue* (1988), and *Dead Wood: An Epitaph* (1990), with sideways glances at two 'odd' texts, *The Flounder* (1977), dealing, amongst other things, with the 'battle' between the sexes, and *The Meeting at Telgte* (1979), a novella which debates the effectiveness of writing as a form of political intervention using a gathering of writers during the Thirty Years War as a thinly veiled allusion to the postwar West German Group 47. Following this, an argument might be made that Grass enters yet another phase with his 'unification' and 'post-unification' novels *The Call of the Toad* (1992) and *Too Far Afield* (1995), and, most recently, his intervention in debates on 'Germans as victims', *Crabwalk* (2002), and the wartime experience of 'ordinary' Germans in *Peeling the Onion* (2006).

This approach promises a more intensive engagement with the 'aesthetic logic' of individual works, their relationship to one another, and the relationship between, indeed the interconnectedness of, the different media in which Grass works. The emphasis might be on character development, perhaps across a number of works, on the importance of milieu (Danzig, for example), on plot development or thematic concerns – again, often across multiple texts, drawings or artefacts – or on the role of narrators and complex narrative structures (in *Dog Years*, for example, there are three books each with its own narrator). Alternatively, there may be an emphasis on Grass's appearances in his own texts as character, author and public figure (e.g., in *Local Anaesthetic* and *From the Diary of a Snail*, or in *Crabwalk*), or, particularly in relation to his poetry, his drama and his drawings, the varied influences on his work and his position (usually) as an 'outsider' on the German (and international) scene. More broadly, there may be a concern with the way in which Grass's work has been adapted, most obviously in film versions of his literary texts but also by other writers or artists incorporating his innovations into their own aesthetic production.

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For some scholars, however, this approach, for all that it usefully focuses attention on issues of aesthetic value, Grass's abilities in different genres and different media, and the thematic and stylistic coherence of his production across these media and over time, may underplay the 'biographical integrity' of his work and thereby its profound engagement with German history, and indeed world history. A focus on aesthetic questions, in fact, may underpin judgments about individual texts as works of art which ignore their social impact, 'representative' nature (e.g. that they 'speak to' readers who recognise aspects of their own biographical experience in Grass's), or their historical significance (e.g. that they were the first to address particular issues or were written as an immediate response to a current debate or political event).

A third approach, implicit in the criticisms levelled against the two approaches outlined above (but not without its own drawbacks, as we shall see), highlights the interconnectedness of Grass's artistic endeavours and his social and political engagement as a 'public intellectual'. Biography is important here to the extent that Grass is held to deploy a narratively constructed version of his own experiences for public consumption in his aesthetic works and his interventions as an essayist, speech-maker and political campaigner. In this approach, however, the 'truth value' of the life-story he presents – whether it is 'authentic' or not – is less important than the use he makes of it to create and sustain his 'public persona', legitimise his interventions, and lend authority and credence to his political positions. Equally, aesthetic matters are important to the extent that particular aesthetic strategies are held to promote Grass's views in this way or that, to frame debates on key social or political principles, or to steer the reader in certain directions. For example, in relation to *Crabwalk* (2002), scholars have argued that the inclusion of the perspectives of three generations of one family re-stages the contest to interpret and memorialise the Nazi past between those who experienced the war directly, those born during the war or just after (i.e. those who would later become the student protesters of '68), and a subsequent cohort less inclined to judge than their '68er' parents and perhaps more susceptible to sentimentalised narratives of 'German victimhood'.

The focus in this approach is very often on the relationship between Grass's narrative fiction – his graphic art, poetry and, to a lesser degree, his drama are largely set to one side – and his essays and speeches. Frequent reference is made to the campaign speeches he made in the 1960s in support of the SPD and to key essays and speeches since that period, for example, on civic values, contemporary issues such as the deployment of American nuclear weapons in West Germany in the 1980s, or the Third World, or

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against German unification both before and after 1990. In each case, literary texts are read as expounding, or expanding, the ideas that are to be found in Grass's public interventions. *Too Far Afield* (1995), for example, is typically understood as an elaboration of a series of essays the author wrote protesting against the impending 'catastrophe' of unification – given their forebears' responsibility for the Holocaust, he claimed, Germans should never again live in a powerful, unified state – and against the 'colonisation' of East Germany after the incorporation of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) had taken place in October 1990.

This interest in Grass as a public figure and on the link between his artistic production and his social engagement typically extends to a consideration of his construction as a 'media figure' – a status that he has deliberately exploited, mobilising his public persona 'Fame', as he puts it in *From the Diary of a Snail*³ and elsewhere – and to Grass's relationship with other writer-intellectuals, particularly those of his own generation such as Martin Walser and Hans Magnus Enzensberger or (from East Germany) Christa Wolf, and his dialogue with them both on major issues of public concern and on the role of the politically engaged writer itself. It also regularly extends to the reception of his work by journalists, social commentators, academics and even Federal Chancellors. Thus the *Verriss* (damning review) of *Too Far Afield* by Marcel Reich-Ranicki, possibly Germany's most influential critic, in the pages of the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* has been much discussed (not least because of the magazine's cover of 21 August 1995 which featured Reich-Ranicki tearing up Grass's book, a clever play on the word *Zerriss*, meaning to rip to pieces) as a politically motivated attack on Germany's most prominent writer-intellectual. Indeed, *Too Far Afield* was frequently condemned at the time as too pro-GDR, as 'soft' on the repressive state and its security services (the *Stasi*), and as anti-western. For scholars, the public reception of both Grass the public intellectual and Grass's artistic, literary, poetic and dramatic works is a key source for their enquiries into the defining debates of (West) Germany's social and political culture.

Scholars who adopt this approach characteristically (and unsurprisingly) reveal something of their own political engagement with Grass's public persona and artistic work, and indeed of their own background. In the United Kingdom and the United States, an older generation of critics tends to be broadly sympathetic towards Grass's campaigning for greater democracy and greater enlightenment in relation to Germany's Nazi past, admiring his role as 'conscience of the nation' and perhaps envious of the prominence that writer-intellectuals can achieve in Germany. In the Federal Republic, opinions are more divided, between respect for his attempts to

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encourage Germans to address the Nazi past and frustration at what seems to some to be a naïve reading, even arrogantly so, of the public mood – this was particularly the case in the run up to unification when Grass set himself against the wishes of the majority, as expressed in elections at that time, for a swift incorporation of the GDR into the Federal Republic. Many women scholars (but not only women), alternatively, might be more interested in Grass's presentation of gender politics (for example, in *The Flounder*, from 1977, which ostensibly deals with the struggle between men's destructive urges and women's maternal accomplishments but which many have read as an anti-feminist tract). A younger generation of critics, similarly, might be keen to examine what it sees as Grass's blindspots in relation to masculine identity, different forms of sexuality, or perhaps representations of ethnic minorities.

Such 'political' readings of Grass, of course, run the risk of reducing his artistic endeavours to the content of his essays – much as the emphasis on biography, as we saw earlier, risks framing his output as an artist, writer, poet and dramatist as a simple reflection of his life-story. Grass's essays, moreover, were written as direct interventions in current political issues; his aesthetic texts, it is argued, are surely intended to be more complex and indeed more ambivalent (art is supposed to provoke discussion rather than make a particular case). To attempt to analyse his work in this way appears to some colleagues to do it an injustice – and to miss the point.

All three of the approaches described above are in conversation in this book, reflecting the choices made by the contributors in their assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of different ways of 'reading Grass'. And, of course, many of the chapters collated here combine elements of more than one of these ways of looking at Grass's life and work along with elements of other possible perspectives.

By way of conclusion, it may be appropriate to say a few words about the contributors to this *Cambridge Companion*. The volume builds on more than forty years of commentary on Günter Grass: amongst English-language critics, honourable mentions must be made of Ann L. Mason's *The Skeptical Muse: A Study of Günter Grass's Conception of The Artist* (1974) and John Reddick's *The Danzig Trilogy of Günter Grass* (1975), which did much to galvanise Grass criticism in the United States and United Kingdom; in Germany, the labours of Volker Neuhaus may claim a similar distinction – and contains chapters by many prominent Grass experts writing today on this versatile and complex German artist. In addition, it introduces the work of a younger generation of critical readers of Grass's texts, namely Rebecca Braun, Helen Finch and Katharina Hall, who are helping to keep Grass scholarship fresh and inspiring. It is

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the ambition of this volume that the conversation between the different chapters contained within it may inspire the next generation of Grass critics – the readers of this book – to make their own contribution to the discussion.

Notes

1. Karl Wilds, 'Identity Creation and the Culture of Contrition: Recasting "Normality" in The Berlin Republic', *German Politics*, 9:1 (2000), 83–102.
2. Günter Grass, *Peeling the Onion* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 8.
3. Günter Grass, *From the Diary of a Snail*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New York: Harcourt, 1976), p. 75.

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I

JULIAN PREECE

Biography as politics

Günter Grass's memoir of his first thirty years, *Peeling the Onion* (2006), which he published a year short of his eightieth birthday, refocused attention on the autobiographical themes of his first three books, *The Tin Drum* (1959), *Cat and Mouse* (1961), and *Dog Years* (1963), which cover much of the same period and made him famous. Grass suddenly becomes a very autobiographical author when these are put together with his next set of prose fiction, which runs *From the Diary of a Snail* (1972) through to *The Flounder* (1977) and *The Rat* (1986), in which the authorial first person, or 'author function' to cite Rebecca Braun's useful new term (see her chapter in this volume), orchestrates the polyphonic narratives. And in *Local Anaesthetic* (1969), *The Call of the Toad* (1992), and *Too Far Afield* (1995), the central characters are roughly Grass's age at the time of publication (early forties in 1969, around seventy in the 1990s) and have a number of biographical features in common with him – both Starusch and Fonty have guilty wartime secrets, for instance.

Yet it is not until the mid-1990s that autobiographical modes predominate in his literary writing, which follows a trend evident in his public statements from the beginning of the previous decade. The collection of one hundred stories which make up *My Century* (1999), for example, alternate between memoir and fiction in ways which may be seen as emblematic for his entire oeuvre. The result is the story of his historical and cultural identity from the events which have shaped it, whether or not he experienced them first hand. There are distinctions to be made: *Peeling the Onion* is fictive autobiography, whereas most of the other books are forms of autobiographical fiction.

In his early fiction Grass attached some of his own experiences to a series of central characters: Oskar in *The Tin Drum*, Pilenz and Mahlke in *Cat and Mouse*, Liebenau in *Dog Years*, and Starusch alias Störtebeker, who appears in secondary roles in his first two novels before taking the lead in *Local Anaesthetic*. Harry Liebenau turns out to have most in common with