

## Günter Grass and International Literature

Julian Preece and Nicole Thesz

*Die Blechtrommel* (1959) was the first German novel written after 1945 to count as 'Weltliteratur', according to Hans Magnus Enzensberger in a much quoted review.<sup>1</sup> The fact that most of it was written in Paris, where the narrated action of the novel concludes with the arrest of its protagonist, gave it an added Franco-German dimension. Günter Grass reinvigorated the German language by refreshing classic native genres, such as the Bildungsroman, the picaresque and the fairy tale, and his vibrant prose was coloured by his reading of Goethe, Grimmelshausen and the Grimms, as well as the modernist triumvirate of Mann, Kafka, and Döblin. Grass often drew attention to these influences, most of which have been thoroughly investigated in the critical literature.<sup>2</sup> Fictional works such as *Das Treffen in Telgte* (1979), *Ein weites Feld* (1995) and *Grimms Wörter* (2010) deal with the 'interrupted' national tradition and his own place within it, but when Grass reviewed formative reading experiences he highlighted writers such as Cervantes, Flaubert, and Montaigne alongside Jean Paul and Fontane.

The young German author and expellee from the lost city of Danzig was in fact an avid reader of foreign authors in translation. His mother's bookcase contained Russian classics by Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky alongside popular historical romances such as *Gösta*

*Berling* (1891) by the Swedish novelist Selma Lagerlöf, which circulated in multiple German

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Wilhelm Meister auf Blech getrommelt', in Gerd Loschütz (ed.), *Von Buch zu Buch. Günter Grass in der Kritik. Eine Dokumentation* (Neuwied/Berlin: Luchterhand, 1968), pp.8-12.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Bernhard Boschenstein, 'Günter Grass als Nachfolger Jean Pauls und Döblins', *Jahrbuch der Jean Paul Gesellschaft* (1971) 6, pp.86-101; and Klaus Haberkamm, 'Das Horskop als erzählerisches Motiv: Grimmelshausen-Goethe-Grass', *Simpliciana. Schriften der Grimmelshausen Gesellschaft* (2007) 29, pp.449-65.

versions before the First World War. In the early 1950s his Düsseldorf sculpture teacher Ludwig Gabriel Schrieber recommended the historical neo-picaresque by Belgian author Charles de Coster, *Tyll Ulenspiegel* (1867);<sup>3</sup> later in Paris Paul Celan pointed Grass to the novels of Rabelais, specifying Gottlob Regis' translation, as explored by Peter Arnds in his contribution to this special issue. Grass also read the Anglo-Irish Laurence Sterne and James Joyce, who reinvented the novel form in the 1760s and 1920s respectively, and the American Modernist Dos Passos. Contemporary classics by the Polish exile Czeslaw Milosz (*Verführtes Denken*) and the British writer George Orwell shaped his political outlook --- *Farm der Tiere* and *1984* naturally, but perhaps more enduringly, Orwell's account of Stalinist betrayal in the Spanish Civil War, *Mein Katalonien*, which first appeared in German in 1956 in a translation by Wolfgang Rieger. If Orwell's impact on post-war West German thinkers and poets was delayed, that of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre was immediate. Once in Paris, as Nicole Theisz reminds us in a contribution about Camus' *La Peste* and *Die Rättin* (1986), Grass followed the dispute between the two leading French public intellectuals, identifying from the start with the younger insurgent Camus and his anti-revolutionary stance. Julian Preece argues that Sartre's seminal essay *Réflexions sur la question juive* nevertheless shaped the portrayal of Jewish characters in his fiction and that Grass's denial of Sartre was part of a self-positioning strategy in the public sphere of West German intellectual politics.

As a campaigner and public figure Grass also showed an interest in the welfare of oppressed authors abroad, whether under communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe or China, in Bangladesh during his visit to the sub-continent in 1986-87, or in the Middle East in the 2000s. On his sole visit to China in 1979, he intervened on behalf of a novel written more than three hundred years ago and still facing censure on account of its explicit sexual content,

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<sup>3</sup> First translated into German by Friedrich von Oppeln-Bronikowski as *Tyll Ulenspiegel und Lamm Goedzak. Legende von ihren heroischen, lustigen und ruhmreichen Abenteuern im Lande Flandern und anderen Orts* (Jena: Diederichs, 1909).

the anonymously published classic *Jin Ping Mei*. Yanhui Wang argues here that just as in Grass's own controversial early fiction, the sexually explicit passages were integral to the social critique in the Chinese novel, which censorious readers have found harder to stomach than the sex, whether in Adenauer's West Germany or the China of Deng Xiaoping two decades later. Grass never specified when he read *Jin Ping Mei* but two widely circulated German translations of the anonymous seventeenth-century novel, subsequently banned by the Nazis, were published during his childhood.<sup>4</sup>

Grass enjoyed foreign travel and spent time outside Germany, but once *Die Blechtrommel* was finished, with the exception of the six-month stay in India, it was to lock himself away at a remote location, either to concentrate on a manuscript or to recuperate after a spell of intensive creative effort. At the rented cottage on the Danish island of Møn or the apartment on the Portuguese Algarve coast he set up studios where he could sculpt, paint or model clay as he did back home in Behlendorf in Northern Germany. At the same time and despite being brought up in a bilingual Polish-German environment, Grass read foreign authors in translation only. His fictions are set in German-speaking or formerly German-speaking locations and there are few traces of Polish in his writing, or indeed of any other language. His interest in his mother's Kashubian heritage, which was repressed while he was growing up, can be felt already in *Die Blechtrommel* and *Hundejahre* (1963) and blossomed during his research for *Der Butt* (1977), but he needed to enlist the assistance of an intermediary, the Gdańsk-based writer and translator Bolesław Fac, to supply him with information and ideas. Miłoslawa Borzyszkowska shows that the cultural dialogue was layered: Grass's works

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<sup>4</sup> *Kin Ping Meh oder Die abenteuerliche Geschichte von Hsi Men und seinen sechs Frauen*, tr. Franz Kuhn (Leipzig: Insel, 1931) was re-issued several times; *Djin Ping Meh*, tr. Otto Kibat with Artur Kibat, 2 vols. (Gotha: Engelhard-Reyher, 1928–1932).

promoted knowledge about the minority, but at the same time they conveyed a conservative image of Kashubians as a fading culture associated with the land, tradition and mythology.

The articles in this special issue of *Oxford German Studies* are devoted to different aspects of Grass's imaginative appropriation of non-German literature in translation. In Grass scholarship much attention has been paid to international reception of his works.<sup>5</sup> Hans Altenhein, who was Grass's editor at Luchterhand for two decades, recalls in a brief memoir written especially for the volume:

Nicht zuletzt durch das Werk von Günter Grass hat der kleine Luchterhand Verlag Anschluss an die Welt, der Name der jungen Foreign-Rights-Verantwortlichen Hannelore Kirchem ist den internationalen Agenturen geläufig, in Danzig besuche ich den polnischen Verlag, in Paris den französischen, in Rom und Tokio treffe ich auf Reisen die Übersetzer des Autors.<sup>6</sup>

Relatively little is known in contrast about how Grass interacted creatively with authors and works from other languages. As 'Auslandsgermanisten', that is German scholars working outside German-speaking countries, we attempt to shift the focus. Three of the articles are devoted to French, with one each on Norwegian, Kashubian, and Chinese. There is quite clearly room for an exhaustive study which took full account of publishing trends and histories and the context of post-war German reception of international literature more generally. We have as yet but scratched the surface of the phenomenon.

Peter Arnds shows that Grass's reading of Rabelais' *Gargantua und Pantagruel*, in the translation by Regis which Celan specified, influenced his writing of *Die Blechtrommel* as an

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Christoph Parry and Jos Joosten (eds.), *The Echo of Die Blechtrommel in Europe: Studies on the Reception of Günter Grass's 'The Tin Drum'* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> The correspondence between Grass and Altenhein, which is among the most interesting between Grass and any collaborator, is held with the Grass Nachlass in the Akademie der Künste in Berlin.

example of Menippean satire. Both authors are concerned with the manifestations of 'human bodily functions' and Grass, like Rabelais, draws on the Bakhtinian notion of the carnival and the grey area between human and animal. Oskar Matzerath is a reincarnation of Rabelais' Panurge, with his zest for story-telling, jokes, and display of animal appetites. Oskar serves too as a 'mimic man' (Homi Bhabha) whose behaviour copies, mocks, and potentially destabilizes those in power. *Die Blechtrommel* cites the tale of Tom Thumb, and the story's associated wolf imagery enriches Oskar's status as someone who both subverts power and participates in it. Oskar hints at Hitler's nickname 'Der Trommler' and obsession with wolves; *Die Blechtrommel* and *Hundejahre* link the imagery of canines to the devil, warfare, and outlaws. Grass shows a far 'bleaker version of carnival' given the loss of any sense of sanctuary against the background of the Holocaust. While Grass may draw on Rabelaisian depictions of female sexual insatiability, fear of cuckoldry, and the interlocked motifs of eating and being eaten, he departs from Rabelais's misogyny and his 'gaiety'. Agnes Matzerath's compulsion to eat fish after the crisis she suffers on Good Friday 1937 on seeing the horse's head squirming with eels is a reversion to Lenten food after the excess of her sexual life. Grass's revival of the spirit of Rabelais in 1950s West Germany was timely, according to Arnds:

Although *Die Blechtrommel* is undoubtedly densely Rabelaisian in its various grotesque scenes and images, it is a prime example for how post-war, postmodern German literature critically inspects the notion of Enlightenment reason. Grass's deformed protagonist reflects his scepticism towards European humanism and the legacy of the Enlightenment, as well as his distrust of any politically enforced rationalism.

In 'Gynter Grass bald anders: Taking the Self out of Autobiography in Grass's *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*', Kirstin Gwyer argues that the strategies Grass used in his 2006 autobiography

were less a product of failed memory work than a project designed to call into question the entire act of autobiographical writing. The bulk of critical reactions to this work addressed the stunning revelation of Grass's Waffen SS membership and the seemingly evasive play with memory that the writer used to reconstruct his past. Gwyer, in contrast, is interested in Grass's building of identity on the basis of Grimmelshausen's protean figure Baldanders and of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. *Peer Gynt* was widely known in German as Grass was growing up and was presumably a favourite in the family as Helene Grass nick-named her imaginative son after Ibsen's fantasist. Gwyer argues on the basis of textual correspondences that Grass consulted the 1901 version by Christian Morgenstern, but other translations were available during his childhood. While scholars such as Helen Finch have read the connection with Baldanders as a sign of evasiveness, Gwyer argues that the intertextual references go beyond 'Schlupflöcher' for difficult memories; nor are they a means to fill gaps in traumatic wartime memories. Indeed, as she points out, Grass compares himself to Grimmelshausen not merely because they share the topic of war, but because he also relied on intertextual references to communicate the war experience. Thus, for Gwyer, Grass turns to Grimmelshausen for a model of intertextual writing that self-reflectively presents its interaction with predecessors, gaining authenticity precisely in the act of negating the possibility of a fully congruent self while embracing a new kind of self-writing as a way to 'encourage a revision of what we think of as authentic autobiography'. Gwyer also explores the parallels between *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* and *Peer Gynt*, who likely served as the source for the image of the onion metaphor. Like Gynt, Grass entertains his mother with dreams of future success, and more importantly, Ibsen has his protagonist similarly fail at achieving a cohesive self, thus 'puncturing the autobiographical illusion of self-congruence'. Not only is he unable to find a core in his metaphoric onion, but he himself is also in many ways constructed. As Gwyer shows, Ibsen draws on various strands in Norwegian folktale, such as an adventurer,

‘Gudbrand Glesne’, and a storyteller, ‘Per Gynt’, whose identity is complicated by the fact that he apparently inserted himself into stories. Ultimately, Grass uses Ibsen’s hero as a means to point towards his own narrative plight. In shaping his autobiographical self he faced an ‘intertextual composite’ drawn from both personal memory and his literary works.

In ‘Return of the Picaresque: Günter Grass’s Self-positioning with Regard to World Literature and Its Effect on His International Reception’, Christoph Parry examines *Die Blechtrommel* with respect first to the way critics abroad placed the novel in the international canon and subsequently how Grass presented himself in European literary tradition. In the context of ‘international literary exchanges’, Parry shows – drawing on Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* – that Grass and *Die Blechtrommel* exemplify how writers and works on the periphery gain access to literary centres, thereby affecting their national reception as well as the standing of the so-called periphery. Early critics in Germany viewed Grass’s debut as a radical break with conventions of post-war writing, which was ‘symptomatic of an impending broader social and cultural transition’, but the novel was internationally received as part of an older European tradition of the picaresque. References to an international literary canon and writers such as Rabelais and Joyce made the novel and its dubious hero more palatable to a potentially sceptical readership. As Parry argues, these reactions impacted in the long run on both Grass’s national reception and his own writing as he engages with major authors of the past, as he does in *Das Treffen in Telgte*, positioning himself as one among equals in the literary Parnassus. Having established his own international reputation, Grass likewise contributed significantly to enhancing the reputation of post-war German writing as a whole. In later works such as *Ein weites Feld* and *Grimms Wörter*, he paid tribute to a specifically German literary heritage. Thus Parry’s article traces a cycle of literary influence that moves from partial rejection at home counterbalanced by

success abroad and resulting in a significant contribution to the rehabilitation of German literature.

In his article on *Jin Ping Mei* and *Katz und Maus* (1961), Yanhui Wang examines the treatment of sexuality as an integral part of broader societal criticism. When Grass visited China in 1979, he attempted to engage writers in a conversation about his texts, which up to that point had not been permitted to appear in Chinese translation, as well as about the similarly suppressed *Jin Ping Mei*. He only succeeded in eliciting polite smiles from his Chinese interlocutors and colleagues. As Wang explains, Grass saw parallels between the reluctance to discuss sexual topics in China and the recrimination against his own works in Germany, where accusations of pornographic content were levelled at both *Die Blechtrommel* and *Katz und Maus*. Grass had already referred explicitly to *Jin Ping Mei* when he defended himself in a trial instigated by Kurt Ziesel in the late 1960s. Wang's argument about the parallels between Grass's early work and *Jin Ping Mei* pursues a three-fold goal. First, both texts include depictions of sexuality as related to money, power, and politics, which can be seen in Joachim Mahlke's fatal attempts to 'perform' (be it sexually, in sports, or in combat) or in the mixture of sexual and financial greed displayed by *Jin Ping Mei* male protagonist. Second, Wang discusses the substantial cuts in the Chinese translation of *Katz und Maus*, all of them involving sexual content, which parallels similar censorship in editions of *Jin Ping Mei*. Finally, Wang elucidates the depiction of passions in *Jin Ping Mei*, relating the protagonist's premature death to insatiable lust that extends, as explained in the novel's preface, to a lust for power, money, and reputation. The protagonist's seduction of his mistress is facilitated by money, while her willingness to succumb is due to her disregard for conventional models of Confucian self-control. Her use of her pet lion to murder her lover's only son is comparable to Grass's depiction of a cat that attacks Mahlke's Adam's apple, although *Katz und Maus* uses the feline motif more broadly to symbolize an era of



victimization. What both writers have in common, however, is the somewhat misogynistic depiction of a femme fatale that hastens the passionate protagonist's end. Altogether, as Wang points out, *Jin Ping Mei* is grounded in a deep-seated fear of the supposed physical dangers of uncontrolled sexuality, which parallels other excesses detrimental to human society (e.g., alcohol), whereas Grass seeks to transcend moral and religious inhibitions as a means to promote authentic expression of individuality.

Miłosława Borzyszkowska examines the role of Kashubian culture in Grass's novels in "Auch über Damrocka wüsste ich gerne ein wenig mehr". Günter Grass' Dialoge mit der kaschubischen Literatur'. Examples of Kashubian characters in his writings include Agnes Matzerath, Jan Bronski, and Anna Koljaiczek in *Die Blechtrommel*, Anton and Lisbeth Stomma in *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke*, Maria Kuczorra in *Der Butt* and Erna Brakup in *Unkenrufe* (1992). Borzyszkowska's focus lies on the dialogue that Grass conducted with Kashubian writers such as Bolesław Fac (seen in letters held at the Berlin Akademie der Künste), who supplied the writer with information about Kashubian history while Grass was working on *Der Butt*. Fac is the main contact point between the German writer and the minority in Poland, making suggestions, supplying materials, and setting up meetings with Kashubian intellectuals and even with Grass's own relatives. He also answered questions regarding the figure of Damrocka, the Kashubian princess who appears in numerous incarnations in *Der Butt* and *Die Rättin* and symbolizing fortitude, beauty, and independence in the male imagination. By portraying characters that represent minorities or have hybrid identities, Grass provides a counter-history to more typical nation-centred approaches to writing the past. In Poland Kashubian culture and language had been acknowledged grudgingly if at all. In *Der Butt*, Grass also brings up Fac's own poems, citing the ambivalent reception in Poland because of their erotic elements. As Borzyszkowska shows, Grass's

works can be counted as Kashubian literature since they evoke Kashubian mythology as well as associated landscapes and dialects. He describes the minority's precarious situation poised between Polish and German culture and occupying what Bhabha might term a 'third space'. Yet while the promotion of Kashubian culture via foreign literatures was welcomed by intellectuals such as Lech Bądkowski, who also sought Grass's help in promoting Kashubian literature abroad, the cultural transmission is complicated by the tensions between periphery and centres of culture. In different ways, as Borzyszkowska's article shows, Grass became a cultural mediator who engaged in dialogues that were literary, political, and personal in nature, and who, despite a measure of cultural appropriation, contributed to world-wide awareness of the Kashubian minority.

The last two articles by the editors of the special issue focus on Grass's readings of Sartre and Camus. Julian Preece explores connections between Sartre and Grass in 'Jean-Paul Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946) as Blueprint for Grass's Jewish Figures: From *Hundejahre* (1963) to *Im Krebsgang* (2002)'. Grass's depiction of Jewish characters has been a subject of controversy in discussions by critics such as Ernestine Schlant, who faulted West German writers for using a 'language of silence' with respect to the Holocaust, Ruth Klüger Angress, who found both his Jewish characters and his take on women problematic, or Siegbert Prawer, who found Grass's characterisation of Jewish characters essentially positive. Preece takes a novel approach by inquiring into shifts in Grass's works, arguing that his depiction of Jewish characters becomes more abstract after *Die Blechtrommel*. He attributes this to the influence of Sartre's views on anti-Semitism and constructions of Jewishness, first translated into German as *Betrachtungen zur Judenfrage* in 1948 and re-issued in 1960 in paperback, as Grass was working on *Hundejahre*. The possible influence of Sartre's thought on Grass may have been overlooked because Grass championed Camus at Sartre's expense. In Grass's fiction, Albrecht and Eddi Amsel in *Hundejahre* and

Hermann Ott in *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* can be understood in terms presented by Sartre regarding the constructedness of Jewish identity, which was also the subject of Max Frisch's contemporaneous neo-Brechtian drama, *Andorra* (1961). For Sartre, anti-Semites defined notions of Jewishness for their own purposes, as is evident in Matern's changing attitudes towards Eddi Amsel, Stomma's assumptions about the gentile Hermann Ott but also in Otto Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter* (1903), which serves Albrecht Amsel as a reference-point in his quest to negate his own Jewishness. Types adumbrated by Sartre are present up to the latter part of Grass's career in the shape of the philo-Semite Wolfgang Stremplin in *Im Krebsgang* who fabricates a Jewish identity for himself.

In the course of his long writing career, Günter Grass repeatedly invoked the works of Albert Camus, whom he first read as a student in the early 1950s, being impressed, as he remembers in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, by the fashionable tenets of existentialism. The article by Thesz examines the shifting impact of Camus' legacy. Grass took special note of Camus' 1942 essay 'Le Mythe de Sisyphe' ('Der Mythos von Sisyphos'), which dealt with life, death, and art in an absurd world. Beginning in *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke*, Grass validates his own political and literary efforts as being part of a productive Sisyphian struggle. Sisyphus is increasingly put to varied use as a means to signify political action in opposition to consumerism, armament, and environmental devastation, which he articulates in *Kopfgeburten* (1980). Thesz argues that his engagement with Camus runs much deeper. Camus's second major novel *La Peste* and Grass's *Die Rättin* share a focus on catastrophic experiences that impact humans at a biological and political level. In both novels, rats embody a parallel world to humanity, evoking the notion of a fundamental solidarity that transcends ideological boundaries: in death and disease, nuclear or environmental devastation, individuals suffer equally regardless of gender, class or nationality. Thesz underscores the evolving views in postwar Europe on politics and writing, as well as biology,

technology, and the environment. Whereas Camus explores existential suffering and imagines a heroic saviour-protagonist, Grass addresses specific political concerns, blaming humanity – including the ineffectual narrator of *Die Rättin* – for endangering planet Earth.

This special issue of *Oxford German Studies* is the product of a conference on the same topic held at Swansea University in September 2017 to mark what would have been Grass's ninetieth birthday the following month (on 16 October) and the publication by Steidl of the final volumes of *Kommentare und Materialien*. These are now due in the autumn of 2020 at the same time as a new complete edition of Grass's works, the so-called *Göttinger Ausgabe*, most of which has been edited up by Dieter Stolz. Hans Altenhein, who oversaw the publication of several of Grass's novels at Luchterhand, showed interest in the gathering but, preparing for his own ninetieth birthday celebrations, was unable to attend. He sent instead an account of their working together which is appended to these seven academic essays. The other contributors, scattered across six countries and three continents, have consulted the editions which were most readily at hand, some preferring paperbacks, others Luchterhand's *Werkausgabe in zehn Bänden* (1987) or Steidl's first *Werkausgabe* (2007), both edited by Volker Neuhaus.

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