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Lives in History

A world novel: The Tin Drum

I had not thought that would happen at all, that someone in the Mid-West of the United States or in the South of France or Scandinavia could possibly be interested in this everyday tale of suburban stuffiness in the transition from the Weimar Republic to National Socialism.

Günter Grass

German authors produced a small number of international classics in the twentieth century. Works by Kafka, Brecht, Thomas Mann, and a tiny handful of others fall into that category, all of them written before the founding of the Federal Republic. The Tin Drum would head most critical lists for the period after 1945 and on many it would be the sole entry. It remains both at home and abroad Günter Grass’s most popular novel, its reputation reinforced by Schlondorff’s 1979 film, the only postwar German production to win an Oscar – appropriately enough, given the hero’s name. The Tin Drum launched the young Grass on his literary career in much the same way as The Sufferings of Young Werther brought Goethe fame at the age of 25 and Buddenbrooks established the 25-year-old Mann. The Tin Drum or Le Tambour became as well known in America or France as Die Blechtrommel had rapidly become in Germany. The author himself exuded all the exoticism of the born Eastern European story-teller, an impression his mustachioed visage and flamboyant persona did nothing to dispel. This too proved to have international appeal.

In Günter Grass the Federal Republic found it possessed a distinctive new voice, acutely aware of the multiple possibilities of language, able to exploit a seemingly inexhaustible range of registers, iconoclastic yet imbued with tradition. He could parody a multitude of genres – from the lewd baroque love lyric to the sentimental Goethean journey – while cocking a snook at all his literary and philosophical masters. Oskar Matzerath is Grass’s first great stylistic imitator: he can hardly ever describe an event, introduce a character, or qualify an emotion without nodding knowingly in the direction of a well-known literary source or popular turn of phrase. The first third of The Tin Drum is reminiscent of nineteenth-century realism; that century’s most notorious literary adulteresses, Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina,
may have inspired his portrayal of Agnes (her lover's name is a variation of Anna Karenina's, Brionski/Vronski). In other sequences Grass is an unabashed Modernist; and as Oskar's great text seems to float on top of so many others, Grass is one of the first post-modern writers, although he would claim he learnt his trade from Sterne and Melville.

Ralph Manheim, who translated all Grass's literary prose works into English until his death in 1992, would claim that he was due at least some of the credit for Grass's phenomenal success in the Anglo-Saxon world, especially the US, which in turn boosted his reputation in the FRG, hungry for any form of international recognition. By 1970, when his photograph appeared on the front cover of Time, Grass was almost as famous in New York as he was in West Berlin. Until Patrick Süskind's Perfume, The Tin Drum was the only German novel written after the war to turn a profit on that side of the Atlantic. Manheim somehow made Grass's writing sound American, leading reviewers to compare him with contemporary US novelists, the so-called 'black humorists', Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, or practitioners of the modern picaresque, J.D. Salinger and Saul Bellow. The Tin Drum spawned American and British imitators, which meant it fed back into the Anglo-American tradition, from which Grass had learnt in the first place. English-language novelists from Rushdie and John Irving to Graham Swift have testified to the electrifying experience of reading The Tin Drum for the first time in translation. Rushdie's Midnight's Children and Irving's best-sellers, The World According to Garp and A Prayer to Owen Meany, who borrows his initials from Grass's hero, are unimaginable without The Tin Drum. Tom Crick, the narrator of Swift's Waterland, is a typically Grassian character: born in 1927 he is troubled by guilt through adulthood on account of deeds committed in his adolescence.

The Tin Drum's popular success was immediate in Germany too. Grass had won the prestigious prize of the Gruppe 47 the year before publication, which signalled the admiration of his peers and delighted his publishers. This prize was not awarded automatically every year and Richter collected the money from the publishers present at the meeting. He recalls how easy it was to amass the sum of 5000 DM, considerably more than Grass had hitherto earned in a year. A year later Hans Magnus Enzensberger wrote the definitively rapturous review:

[Günter Grass] shows our cultivators of literary allotment gardens, whether they rake their flowerbeds in a neo-Biedermeier or neo-Expressionist style, what is meant by the word 'spade'. This man is a trouble-maker, a shark in the sardine pond, a rogue elephant in the domesticated reservation of contemporary German letters.

With statements such as these, 'the myth of The Tin Drum' was born.

The same group of adjectives and epithets recurred in review after review: Grass was 'bursting with energy', a 'naturally poetic young lad', a 'literary lumberjack', even the 'Cassius Clay of contemporary German literature'; The Tin Drum was 'bizarre', 'juicy', 'vital', 'a virtuoso performance', 'fantastical', 'colourful', 'scurrilous', 'sardonic', 'provoking', and, of course, 'infantile' and 'pornographic'. Terms such as