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Return of the Picaresque. Günter Grass's Self-positioning with Regard to World Literature and its Effect on his International Reception.

Introduction: World Author and World Literature

In his 2001 monograph on Günter Grass, Julian Preece calls *Die Blechtrommel* a 'world novel'.¹ By implication the author of a world novel can be expected to classify as a world author, just as the individual work is accorded the status of world literature. But what do we mean by world literature? The term is popular and useful and seemingly self-evident. But at the same time it is notoriously vague. While often thought of in terms of a canon of great books, world literature is more than that. The canon or canons provide terms of reference in the discourses of and about literature, but they do not in themselves constitute world literature and were certainly not quite what Goethe had in mind, when he famously used the term *Weltliteratur* in his conversations with Eckermann. It is thus more fruitful to consider world literature in the sense that David Damrosch uses the term as a 'mode of circulation and reading'.² Starting with *Die Blechtrommel* Günter Grass contributed to this circulation process. Both the author and *Die Blechtrommel* in particular today undoubtedly belong to a currently accepted canon of world literature. This is due not least to the way the book itself engages with the living tradition of World Literature and has acted as an inspiration for other writers.³ The importance of the novel was recognised almost immediately upon its publication, a fact that led to its wide distribution in translation. Proceeding from its initial reception, which recognised Grass's debt to the picaresque tradition, this paper discusses the author's relationship to literary precursors in general and the picaresque in particular. Finally I suggest that Grass establishes an illustrious framework into which the author in his later writing consciously positions himself, not least by integrating his "own" canon of predecessors into his later work.

How literatures, or more precisely, literary fields interact and form hierarchies on an international level is the subject of the well-known, if somewhat controversial study by Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*. Casanova is best known for her discussion of literary circulation in terms of an international hierarchy of literatures or literary fields, where writers from the periphery seek acknowledgement from a literary centre. If they are sufficiently successful in that centre – Casanova cites as examples August Strindberg and James Joyce in Paris⁴ – their success there can promote their reception in the more peripheral literary fields of their origin and ultimately even help to upgrade the international status of those fields as a whole.

Somewhat oddly, in view of her own Parisian perspective, Casanova mentions Grass only in passing and in the context of the general unpopularity of German novels in Britain.⁵ She could actually have made more of him and *Die Blechtrommel* in particular, because the history of the novel's genesis is a nice example – if only by coincidence – of the continued

¹ Julian Preece, *The Life and Works of Günter Grass. Literature, History, Politics* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 34.

² David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 5.

³ Both aspects are emphasised in Peter Arnds, 'Günter Grass and magical realism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Günter Grass*, ed. by Stuart Taberner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 52–66.

⁴ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2004) [Paris: Seuil 1999], pp. 136–137.

⁵ Casanova (2004), p. 167.

importance in post-war Europe of the French capital as a literary hub. Not only did Grass write his novel in Paris, but he also sought advice from the Paris based poet Paul Celan. And who, if not Celan, who grew up in the most peripheral of European peripheries, best demonstrates the continuing magnetism of Paris until well into the second half of the 20th century?

Despite the scant attention paid by Casanova to Günter Grass, the circulation and reception of *Die Blechtrommel* well illustrate the mechanisms of international literary exchange that her study undertakes to explain. My focus here is on how different readerships place Grass in the context of their concepts of world literature and, finally, on how Grass in later years positions himself.

Reception of *Die Blechtrommel*

Grass was not born a world author. That status was conferred on him by his international readership largely through the success of his first novel. The immediate response of critics and readers and the book market as a whole does not automatically imply canonisation either on a national or international scale. That, I suggest, is the result of continued critical and academic attention over generations and only applies as long as the work remains available and an object of such attention. However, the initial reception can provide an impression of what the basis for a work's future 'consecration' (to use a term from Pierre Bourdieu) might be.

International reception will naturally differ from the original national reception, not least because it is in many cases based on a different text, the translation. But even leaving the issue of translation aside, differences can be particularly revealing, since so many factors influencing national reception are specific to the local context and of little interest to a broader foreign audience. International reception will then be likely to emphasise more general and internationally familiar features. Sensitivities and taboos of little concern to foreign audiences can provoke a strong emotional response on the national level, as is the case with Grass's depiction of ethnic conflict in 1930s Danzig. In domestic reviews, the immediate political context tends to play a more central role and the comparisons are more likely to be drawn from among domestic and contemporary writers, whereas in the international reception comparisons are more frequently drawn from within an international canon – allowing of course for individual national variations in the composition of this canon. This can be explained with reference to the different "horizons of expectation" as seminally described by Hans Robert Jauß in his *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft*. Readers look for familiar elements or "signals" in the text in order to be able to fit the new reading experience into familiar terrain. Even the most innovative books are generally read against a background of expectations formed to a large extent by previous reading. It follows that different audiences will have different expectations.⁶ Sensitivities and taboos of little concern to foreign audiences can provoke a strong emotional response on the national level, as is the case with Grass's depiction of ethnic conflict in 1930s Danzig and his generally disrespectful stance towards issues of national pride. In domestic reviews, the immediate political context tends to play a significant role and the comparisons are more likely to be

⁶ Hans Robert Jauß, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 175.

drawn from among domestic and contemporary writers, whereas in the international reception comparisons are more frequently drawn from within an international canon of older and contemporary literature – allowing of course for individual national variations in the composition of this canon. In the case of foreign works their very foreignness may invoke certain stereotypical expectations. In some works an exotic cultural background remains just that, background, but in many cases the logic of the work demands that the readers make a special effort to come to terms with cultural difference.⁷ So it makes a difference whether Grass is read in Germany as a local author, outside Germany as a specifically German author or internationally as a “world author” irrespective of his national origins. With an author as intensively concerned with the recent history of his country as Grass was, the latter option might appear purely hypothetical, but, as I hope to show in the following pages, the international critical reception of *Die Blechtrommel* with its emphasis on those elements of the novel which linked it to a common European literary tradition seem to indicate a tendency to see Grass as transcending national confines

In Germany the publication of *Die Blechtrommel* presented a radical break with established somewhat pedestrian conventions of post-war German writing and was symptomatic of an impending broader social and cultural transition. German society in the 1950s had been completely numbed by the material and psychological ruins left by World War II and the National Socialist past.⁸ When Theodor Adorno made his famous dictum that writing poems after Auschwitz was barbaric, he pointed to a problem not restricted to lyric poetry alone.⁹ The difficulty of confronting the immediate past led to a general silence in public discourse, and where this silence was broken, the results reflected the prevailing awkwardness that admission of individual and collective guilt entailed. This awkwardness is embodied in the very word ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ with its implication of overcoming or managing the past. A common strategy was to uphold the delusion of ignorance or to distinguish between good (or normal) Germans and bad Nazis. This was the case in works as various as Peter Bamm’s *Die unsichtbare Flagge* (1952) and Alfred Andersch’s *Sansibar oder der letzte Grund* (1957). The end of the decade, however, saw more innovative approaches with Böll’s *Billard um halb zehn* (1959) or Christian Geissler’s *Anfrage* (1960), which both deal explicitly with the National Socialist past and the rehabilitation of prominent Nazis in Adenauer’s Germany. But these novels, too, were directly moralizing and upheld an oversimplified black and white view of the Nazi period and its remnants in Adenauer’s republic. Böll’s novel, for example, focuses on experiences of a family of architects and has as a central symbol an abbey, built by the grandfather after World War I, blown up by his son in the course of his duty as a military engineer in the last days of World War II and now being rebuilt by the grandson. With its allegorical plot structure and its euphemistic, even

⁷ In the case of *Die Blechtrommel* and the ‘Danzig Trilogy’ as a whole, the milieu of pre-war Danzig will have seemed quite exotic to many West German readers too.

⁸ This condition was famously diagnosed by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (Munich: Piper 1969).

⁹ ‘Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben.’ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft’, in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 10.1 (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 30.

obscurantist distinction between the ‘Sakrament des Büffels (Host of the Beast)’ and the ‘Sakrament des Lammes (Host of the Lamb)’ Böll’s novel seems strangely artificial and lacks the force of the *Die Blechtrommel* published in the same year.

Grass’s approach was different in that in place of self-conscious ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ he let his carnivalesque narrative run free. Grass himself was later to summarize his achievement with his first novel as follows:

Vielleicht gelang es dem Autor, einige neu anmutende Einsichten freizuschaufeln, schon wieder ver mummt es Verhalten nackt zu legen, der Dämonisierung des Nationalsozialismus mit kaltem Gelächter den verlogenen Schauer regelrecht zu zersetzen und der bis dahin ängstlich zurückgepfiffenen Sprache Auslauf zu schaffen; Vergangenheit bewältigen konnte (wollte) er nicht.¹⁰

As a literary device Grass’s protagonist narrator is, of course, no less artificial than Böll’s three generations of architects. But Grass’s grotesque figure of Oskar does not point an accusing finger or drumstick at the grown up world around him. Instead he records its deficiencies, and his by no means innocent exploits are interventions that further unmask the proto-fascist complacency of his compatriots. Oskar, whose stubborn refusal to grow indicates his rejection of adulthood, remains a child in the manner in which he observes the world around him without analysing or passing judgement. But Oskar is childlike only as far as it is in his interest to be so. His sexual maturity as a teenager advances in contrast to his stature, and the attention Grass pays to this can be counted among the many Menippean features of the novel. However, by delegating the moral judgement to his readers Grass leaves his text open to attack. While some critics, especially younger ones like Hans Magnus Enzensberger,¹¹ enthusiastically greeted the novel, many in the literary establishment rejected it outright. Readers not wishing to engage with the historical dimension of the novel and look into the mirror that Oskar held up to them directed their revulsion onto the protagonist instead of his milieu. Thus, when German reviewers rejected the work, they pointed to its obscenities and its sacrilegious aspects rather than its breaking of political and moral taboos – a diversionary strategy that says more about the critics than the book. The prominent critic Günter Blöcker for example voiced the disapproval of many readers when he called Oskar ‘eine allegorische Figur von schwer zu überbietender Abscheulichkeit’.¹² Blöcker returned to his critique of *Die Blechtrommel* at the beginning of his later review of Grass’s *Hundejahre*, claiming that through his choice of protagonist Grass had fallen short of a big topic:

Was ‘Die Blechtrommel’ zum Ärgernis machte, waren ja nicht so sehr die Auswüchse der Grassschen Fäkalphantasie; es war das Verfehlen eines großen Themas. Daß der Erzähler das nur allzu berechnete Aufbegehren gegen die depravierte Welt der Erwachsenen einem Wesen anvertraute, das aus dem Protest notwendigerweise eine Grimasse machen mußte – dieses

¹⁰ Günter Grass: ‘Rückblick auf die Blechtrommel’ broadcast by Westdeutscher Rundfunk 16th December 1973 and published in print by Süddeutsche Zeitung on 12th January 1974. Reprinted in Günter Grass: *Werkausgabe in zehn Bänden*, vol. 9 (Munich: Luchterhand, 1987) p. 625.

¹¹ Enzensberger’s review, ‘Wilhelm Meister, auf Blech getrommelt’ (originally broadcast by Süddeutscher Rundfunk, Stuttgart (18.11.1959) is reprinted in Gert Loschütz (ed.), *Von Buch zu Buch. Günter Grass in der Kritik* (Neuwied, Berlin: Luchterhand 1968) pp. 8–12.

¹² Loschütz (ed.) 1968, p. 22. Full text of Blöcker’s review pp. 21–24.

“verfratzt schon aus der Wurzel”, das aus dem Balg des Trommlers tönte, war es, was Mißbehagen schuf.¹³

In retrospect, and in view of the unusual international success of the novel, one might conclude that perhaps Blöcker himself had missed the point. In place of the gentle allegory of works like Bölls *Billard um halb zehn*, the sheer scale of the atrocities of Fascism and World War II demanded of literature a much more drastic approach such as Menippean satire.

Blöcker was not alone. His colleague Marcel Reich-Ranicki, later to become Germany's most prominent literary critic, had dismissively compared Grass's style with the virtuosity of a Gypsy fiddler in his first review in *Die Zeit* and later felt compelled by the success of the novel to take the exceptional step of publicly revising his earlier opinion.¹⁴

The reservations of German critics masked a bad conscience, or at least a reluctance to take an honest look at the past. Readers elsewhere in Europe will not have been inhibited in the same way. Outside the cramped and censorious discursive context of West Germany the critics were generally more responsive. In the early phase of reception much controversy surrounded the issue of the novel's moral acceptability. But while opinions varied as to whether the novel was in good taste or not, its literary quality as a whole was seldom challenged. Specific aspects of the novel that had troubled German critics failed to arouse much emotional response elsewhere. Thus, for example, the whole subtext of migration from the Eastern territories lost by Germany in World War II features less prominently in non German discussions of the work, whereas Grass's uncompromising rejection of the German militarist tradition and generally disrespectful treatment of national and religious icons, which many German readers still found unpalatable in 1959, met with approval abroad.

There were of course differences in the way the novel was disseminated and received in different parts of Europe. In both Italy and Poland objections were raised before it was published for fear of offending Catholic feelings. In Poland, where the novel had been publicly discussed long before the official translation was released in 1983, this was a convenient excuse to cover up other perhaps more political grounds for not wanting to disseminate a work so completely at odds with the fundamental principles of socialist realism.¹⁵ In Italy too the qualms were of a political and aesthetic nature. The post-war cultural situation resembled that of West Germany. In both countries the governing Christian Democrats promoted moralizing cultural conservatism, and in Italy the Communist opposition, with its strong Moscow orientation, was also uninterested in avant-garde writing.

¹³ Reprinted in Günter Blöcker, *Literatur als Teilhabe. Kritische Orientierungen zur literarischen Gegenwart* (Berlin: Argon Verlag, 1966), p. 24.

¹⁴ The original review, 'Auf gut Glück getrommelt', published in *Die Zeit* 1. 1. 1960, and Reich-Ranicki's later revision, 'Selbstkritik des "Blechtrommel-Kritikers"', broadcast by WDR Cologne in May 1963, are both reprinted in Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Unser Grass* (Munich: DVA, 2003) pp. 13–18 and pp. 19–26 respectively.

¹⁵ In Poland one chapter had been published as early as 1958 in the literary Journal *Nowa Kultura* in connection with a visit by the young Grass to that country. A full translation was published underground in 1979. See Mirosław Ossowski, 'Die Blechtrommel in Polen. Der mühsame Weg zum Erfolg', in *The Echo of 'Die Blechtrommel' in Europe: Studies on the Reception of Günter Grass's 'The Tin Drum'*, ed. by Jos Joosten and Christoph Parry (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016), pp. 63–76. See also Janina Gesche: *Aus zweierlei Perspektiven. Zur Rezeption der Danziger Trilogie von Günter Grass in Polen und Schweden in den Jahren 1958–1990*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003).

When the novel was published by Feltrinelli as *Il Tamburo di latta* in October 1962, a full year after the French and English translations, it marked the arrival of the liberalization of the 1960s.¹⁶

In France the flamboyant novel was translated early and immediately well received, not so much as something radically innovative, but as a return to the picaresque tradition, influenced, as Grass himself readily admitted, among others by Rabelais and Charles de Coster's *Ulenspiegel*. The latter work in particular, itself a historically and geographically transposed revival of the Eulenspiegel legends, proved a source of inspiration for his own style of writing as Grass claims in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*.¹⁷ As Stéfanie Vanasten elaborates in her overview of the novel's French reception, the early recognition of its connection with the baroque and picaresque tradition assisted its enculturation into the French literary field and established a mode of reading that was finally legitimized in the educational context by its admission to the syllabus for the official university entry exam *Agrégation de Lettres modernes* in 2004.¹⁸

The emphasis placed in France on the picaresque pedigree of *Die Blechtrommel* can be seen as a type of domestication, to borrow the term from Lawrence Venuti. One of the inevitable 'scandals of translation', and of literary exchange in general, is that the signals readers look for to orientate themselves are not just situated within the text of the author, but are part of the whole framework of its packaging in which translators, editors, publishers, critics and even academics can be crucially involved.¹⁹ In the case of *Die Blechtrommel* it is not so much a question of making the novel seem more French, but rather making it less specifically German. By placing it in a recognisable European rather than national tradition, French reviewers made the novel more readily accessible and palatable to their readers.

With the label "picaresque" the excesses of the novel and more immediate memories of the World Wars could be tamed and so references to the picaresque were common in the early critical reception of the novel not only in France. This was for example the case in Finland, a country with a very young literary tradition in its national language. The first translation of *Die Blechtrommel* was published in 1961 as *Peltirumppu* and the first major review, a relatively extensive essay by the avant-gardist poet Pentti Saarikoski, soon appeared in the literary journal *Parnasso*.²⁰ The review celebrated *Peltirumppu* for its picaresque exuberance and named as points of reference Rabelais (again), Gogol and Joyce – specifically his *Ulysses*. Of these only Gogol was better known to the Finnish public, although Rabelais's *Gargantua* had been translated in 1947. *Ulysses* was not yet available in Finnish but very familiar to the reviewer who at the time was himself working on the first Finnish translation. So here, from the point of view of the readership addressed by the review, the comparison is

¹⁶ On the publication history of *Il Tamburo di latta* see Eva Banchelli, 'Die Blechtrommel und die italienische Kulturszene Anfang der Sechziger Jahre', in *The Echo of 'Die Blechtrommel' in Europe*, pp. 77–96.

¹⁷ Grass calls de Coster's work 'Ein pralles Gemenge erzählter Zeitläufte, das meiner noch immer gehemmten Schreibwut zum Treibsatz werden sollte'. Günter Grass: *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*. (Munich: DTV, 2008 [Göttingen: Steidl, 2006]) p. 436.

¹⁸ Stéfanie Vanasten, "'Schon schnellten sich von Oskars Zunge einige französische Wörtchen.'" *Die Blechtrommel in Frankreich*, in *The Echo of Die Blechtrommel in Europe*, pp. 164–166.

¹⁹ Cf. Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 67–87 on the 'Formation of Cultural Identities'.

²⁰ Pentti Saarikoski, 'Cineraama', in *Parnasso* 5, 1961, pp. 257–258.

not so much with the familiar but rather with the famous. In terms of the mechanisms of literary exchange, Saarikoski's work as a reviewer and, of course, as a translator, was very much engaged in the process of aligning the Finnish periphery to the bigger literary centres. In fact this first review set the tone for most of the reviews that were to follow in the national press and was extensively quoted in the afterword to the second translation of the novel in 2004.

If Saarikoski's review can be seen as a contribution to the process of deprovincialising the Finnish literary field, *Die Blechtrommel* itself, through its international success, had a similar effect in raising the international status of contemporary (West) German literature. For almost three decades after 1933, modern German literature had been represented outside the German-speaking countries, if at all, by works published either before the 1930s or written in exile. Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht or Stefan Zweig were appreciated. Hans Fallada, on the other hand, waited more than six decades to be rediscovered by anglophone readers after Michael Hofmann's translation of his classic *Jeder stirbt für sich allein* as *Alone in Berlin*. Work written inside Germany itself during the Third Reich and its aftermath tended to be regarded at best as singularly provincial, and generally as longwinded and dull. As late as the 1990s Pascale Casanova remarks: 'For many readers the very adjective "German" is associated with heaviness and an absence of humour and style...'.²¹ A similar point was repeatedly made by Finnish critics in their reviews of *Die Blechtrommel*. Almost all were positively surprised by Grass's style, but they down-played this surprise by pointing out that Grass wasn't really entirely German but half Polish – significantly nobody bothered to find out who the Kashubians were! By the end of the century Grass's mixed origins and the multicultural environment of his home city largely disappear from the public perception of the writer who by now had become probably the best known representative of contemporary German literature.²²

***Die Blechtrommel* as a Picaresque Novel**

Leaving aside the question of Oskar's or Grass's Polish or Kashubian ancestry, the opinion that, e.g., *Le Tambour*, *Peltirumppu* or *The Tin Drum*, were less heavy-handed than might be expected from bulky German novels was widespread, as was the recognition of its proximity to the picaresque. It is worthwhile taking a closer look at the distinguishing features of the picaresque genre and discussing how far they apply to Grass's writing in *Die Blechtrommel*. The attribution of genre is naturally of interest mostly to scholars and critics. However, from the point of view of reception and dissemination it can make a difference how the work is presented by the publisher and by the reviewers. Moreover, different genres have different connotations in different literary cultures.

Scholarly work framing *Die Blechtrommel* in a picaresque context began to appear in the latter half of the 1960s.²³ In an essay of 1966 Willy Schumann presents *Die Blechtrommel*

²¹ Casanova (2004), p. 167.

²² Interest in the specific historical location had always been strongest among German and Polish readerships. See, e.g., the review in the expellee publication *Unser Danzig* (1960), in which the reviewer takes issue with the hostile depiction of Danzig's German population (Loschütz 1968, pp. 25-26).

²³ Most extensively by Wilfried Van der Will, *Pikaro heute: Metamorphosen des Schelms bei Thomas Mann, Döblin, Brecht, Grass*, (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1967). For a further discussion of scholarly

alongside Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull* (1954) and Alois Vigoleis Thelen's *Die Insel des zweiten Gesichts* (1953) as representatives of a new opening in German literature, indicative of the destabilization of bourgeois society and values in 20th-century Germany. Schumann explicitly pits the picaresque against the *Bildungsroman*, which he seems to equate with the mainstream of German narrative fiction from the Middle Ages to the mid-twentieth century:

Es erhebt sich die Frage nach Gründen für das verhältnismäßig seltene Auftreten des Picaro in der literarischen Landschaft des deutschen Sprachraums. Liegt dem Deutschen der Typ des flinken, schlaun Gauners nicht? Sind die Deutschen wirklich so 'teutonisch' unbeweglich, so schwerfällig und 'tief' wie man es manchen Orten gern haben will, daß sie mit dem schnellfüßigen und -züngigen Schelm nichts anfangen können, der die aufgeblasene, hohle und unechte Welt an der Nase herumführt und sie immer wieder in überlegener Weise entlarvt und bloßstellt? Eine noch verwegene Vermutung: sind die nordischen Sucher aus den großen deutschen Romanen, die Parzivals, Wilhelm Meisters, Heinrich Lees im grünen Anzug, Heinrich Drensdorfs im Rosenhaus, Hans Castorps vom verzauberten Berg auf ihren mühseligen und dornigen Bildungsfahrten dem schlaun, quecksilbrigen südländischen Helden zu fremd, als daß er in ihrer Gesellschaft heimisch werden könnte?²⁴

The *Bildungsroman* is indelibly associated with a German tradition, as the import of the German term into English demonstrates. Of course the Picaro was originally Spanish, but as a genre, the picaresque predates both the rise of modern national literary fields and that of the modern conception of the individual subject and can be regarded as standing in the much older Menippean tradition. Yet by drawing parallels between *Die Blechtrommel* and the picaresque, international critics and scholars emphasised its readability outside the national context.

Where the picaresque bears a certain resemblance to the *Bildungsroman* is in the focus on the formation of the central figure, on his or her efforts of survival and betterment. The genres differ, however, in respect to the kind of education or formation the protagonist receives and how he (or less frequently she) receives it. Oskar claims to have received his formative education from Goethe, Rasputin and Frau Greff, the greengrocer's wife. But by including the genesis and mutation of Oskars physical deformity – "Bildung" or "Missbildung" in the most literal sense – the story of his formation goes well beyond what would be expected from a traditional *Bildungsroman*. Like *Felix Krull* and for similar reasons, *Die Blechtrommel* can be read as a picaresque travesty of the *Bildungsroman*.

Characteristics often mentioned in connection with the picaresque include first person autobiographical narrative by a usually somewhat disreputable protagonist who stands outside the mainstream of society, an episodic narrative structure and an amoral plot, if we can talk of plot at all. The protagonist tends to survive by means of opportunist improvisation. The *picaro* or *Schelm* is a rogue and a jester and ideally situated to see through hypocrisy while at the same time not being free of hypocrisy in his own narrative, as Bernhard Malkmus points out in connection with *Lazarillo*, the arch-picaro of Spanish literature:

literature on *Die Blechtrommel* and the picaresque see Siegfried Mews, *Günter Grass and his Critics: From the 'Tin Drum' to 'Crabwalk'* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2008), pp. 22–28.

²⁴ Willy Schumann, 'Wiederkehr der Schelme' *PMLA*, vol. 81, no. 7 Dec. 1966, pp. 467–474. Here p. 467.

While his *apologia* implies a conventional condemnation of criminal social behaviours, it aims at eliciting praise for his own adoption of morally corrupt principles. [...] This endows him with an ambiguous identity poised between victim (turned decent citizen) and deceiver,...²⁵

A similar ambiguity overshadows Oskar's narrative, which is framed as a kind of confession to Bruno, his nurse at the mental institution where he writes his memoirs.

Since the perspective is that of the outsider not conforming to social norms, the picaresque has a strong potential for social critique without obligation to suggest concrete alternatives to the social deficiencies highlighted. Together with the episodic structure of the narrative such pronounced neutrality of perspective is resistant to the teleological undercurrent that has characterized the major genres of the European novel over the past centuries. The *Bildungsroman* shared with the great social novels of the 19th century some idea of coherent identity and general progress – if not always of society at large, then at least of the characters.

Seen from this angle, the episodic nature of the plot, too, turns out to be a prerequisite for the picaresque, because only such a loose structure can avoid falling into the teleological trap. Mikhail Bakhtin, who prefers the broader term Menippean to picaresque, makes a similar point when he distinguishes between the social-psychological or 'biographical' novel and the boulevard adventure novel of the 19th century, which he sees as standing in a Menippean tradition. The plot in the psychological novel is for Bakhtin 'body and soul of the hero' whereas the adventure plot is simply 'clothing draped over the hero, clothing which he can change as often as he pleases' and which 'does not rely on already available and stable positions – family, social, biographical; it develops in spite of them.'²⁶ Typically for the picaresque, *Die Blechtrommel* meets these latter criteria. The 'available and stable positions' that the conventional biographical novel draws on are systematically destabilized, starting with the ambiguity of Alfred Matzerath's, and, later, Oskar's fatherhood. Furthermore the events and adventures that take place during the course of the novel form no more than a loose sequence without noticeably contributing to the protagonist's development, except perhaps in his erotic education, since Oskar presents himself as more or less fully developed from earliest childhood. From his unusual perspective Oskar throws light on the weakness and defects of surrounding society and acts as a catalyst regularly generating scandals, which again is in Bakhtin's view a typically carnevalesque Menippean strategy.²⁷

The Authority of the Writer and the Play with Literary History

Grass himself pays respect to the picaresque in his later work, particularly in his short novel or 'Erzählung', *Das Treffen in Telgte*. Set towards the end of the Thirty Years' War the book is a tribute to both Hans Werner Richter, initiator and figurehead of the Gruppe 47, and to the

²⁵ Bernhard F. Malkmus, *The German Picaro and Modernity: Between Underdog and Shape-shifter* (New York: Continuum, 2011), p. 27.

²⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and transl. by Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 104. The validity of Bakhtin's distinction is readily apparent in comparing *Die Blechtrommel* with Böll's *Billard um halb zehn*, where the whole family of architects is immutably chained to the plot.

²⁷ Bakhtin (1984), p. 117.

German Baroque poets in their efforts to establish a degree of early national consciousness in their work. In what is a respectful parody of the meetings of the Gruppe 47 the major German poets of the Baroque era are summoned together towards the end of the Thirty Years' War to read from their works and to draft a common manifesto. The meeting, convened by Simon Dach, would not have succeeded at all, were it not for the intervention of the rogue Christoffel Gelnhausen who in turn is clearly based on Grimmelshausen's *Simplicius Simplicissimus*, the most frequently cited representative of the picaresque in German literature. Grass's Gelnhausen shocks the earnest poets with his exploits (without which they would not even have found a venue) and leaves them in continuous doubt as to which versions of his stories, or *Lügendgeschichten*, are true and which are fictions. It is Gelnhausen who appropriates a guesthouse for the poets and then provides a wonderful conference dinner with looted goods, leaving the poets with a moral hangover.

By juxtaposing the adventurer Gelnhausen with the learned poets Grass achieves not only a comic effect, but also an instrument with which the social position of literature between idealism and pragmatism can be plotted. Gelnhausen certainly presents the kind of moral dilemma that Malkmus mentions in connection with Lazarillo. Seemingly remorseful, he returns to the meeting during its final session and announces that, although he has no formal education, he plans to become a writer. In a statement of a few sentences he presents a poetic programme diametrically opposed to the learned exercises of the assembled poets:

Eher werde er den großen Sack aufmachen, den gefangenen Stunk freisetzen, des Kronos Parteigänger sein, den langen Krieg als Wortgemetzel abermals eröffnen, alsdann ein entsetzliches Gelächter auffliegen lassen und der Sprache den Freipass geben, damit sie laufe, wie sie gewachsen sei: grob und leisgestimmt, heil und verletzt, hier angewelscht, dort maulhenckolish [sic], immer aber dem Leben und seinen Fässern abgezapft.²⁸

This small poetic manifesto, echoing almost verbatim the author's characterisation of his *Blechtrommel* in his talk 'Rückblick auf Die Blechtrommel' (1973) quoted earlier²⁹, describes both the writing of 17th-century Grimmelshausen and 20th-century Grass.

Based, as it is, on the confluence of two separate but comparable phases in German (literary) history and thus requiring some specialist knowledge to be fully appreciated, *Das Treffen in Telgte* has understandably not achieved the same international success as the earlier *Blechtrommel* or even its immediate predecessor *Der Butt*, published in 1977.³⁰ Not only does it depend on familiarity with the historical events and German poets it plays with, it also belongs as a narrative to a different genre. In fact, although it pays tribute to the picaresque in the figures of Gelnhausen and the landlady Libuschka,³¹ it is itself not a picaresque work. With its focus on a single central event *Das Treffen in Telgte* comes closer to the concentrated narrative of the novella than to the rambling sequence of adventures that characterize the picaresque novel and it owes far less to international precedents.

²⁸ Günter Grass, *Das Treffen in Telgte* (Darmstadt, Neuwied: Luchterhand 1979), p. 154.

²⁹ See footnote 10.

³⁰ Cf. Mews, (2008), p. 172. Mews's claim that the work has only been translated into three languages, English, French and Italian, is not quite accurate. E.g. a Finnish translation was published in 1980.

³¹ Libuschka appears in Grimmelshausen's work both under that name and as Courasche, the inspiration for Brecht's famous Mother Courage.

But in one respect, in the ambivalent position of its narrator, the text does come close to an international precedent. The perspective seems to be that of straightforward authorial extradiegetic narration until the narrator starts using the first person, indicating his presence among the assembled poets but coquettishly refusing to reveal his identity. Thus the distinction between author and narrator that teachers of literature have always liked to emphasize is destabilized. This resembles the famous discussion of authorship in *Don Quixote*, where at the beginning of the second book the narrator claims to be the author and challenges imposters who had already published sequels to the first book. The small volume of *Das Treffen in Telgte* stands, together with *Der Butt*, on the threshold of a new, ambivalent narration, which, as Rebecca Braun argues, foregrounds the issue of authorship. *Das Treffen in Telgte* is not only about authors talking about writing and their public responsibility, but actually highlights the performative aspect of the individual writers' interventions.³²

Conclusion: World Author and Voice of the *Kulturnation*

Despite its strongly localised focus, it was *Die Blechtrommel* that launched Grass's career as "world author". At the same time it helped to revitalise the West German literary scene by drawing on a distinctly international heritage. In doing so the novel arguably helped post-war German writing overcome its isolation and attract international attention. But if Grass himself cited an international pedigree for the work that made him famous (including Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* in addition to Rabelais, de Coster, and Joyce discussed here), the gallery of famous colleagues who make appearances in his later novels is German. Starting with *Der Butt*, Grass's author/narrator fraternises within the narrative itself with great writers of the past in an often very entertaining way. Here the author playfully allows the narrator take on the identities of numerous different figures in different ages, breaking down effectively the concept of narrator as separate from author. By identifying with these figures in his timeless 'Vergegenkunft' he not only pays them homage, but also positions himself as one among equals in the literary Parnassus. Literary predecessors populating Grass's later work range from Martin Opitz and the Baroque poets through the romantics to Theodor Fontane in *Das weite Feld*. And if Grass does not always treat them with respect – pedantic Opitz gets a rough ride in *Der Butt* – their depiction is generally characterized by good-humoured familiarity. Perhaps Grass's most categorical but also most intimate expression of his feelings for German literary heritage is the "declaration of love" with which he subtitled his late prose masterpiece *Grimms Wörter*.³³

As a "world author" and internationally recognised German public figure, Grass remained politically antinationalist, but culturally increasingly enthusiastic about the German language and its literature. Having published his 'world novel' and thus contributed to raising the international status of post-war German literature generally, Grass in his later work propagated older traditions of German writing. Tellingly, it is not Goethe and Schiller, but less familiar and less auratic traditions like Grimmelshausen, the German Baroque poets, the Early Romantics and the Grimm brothers – the second division of the German canon as it

³² Rebecca Braun, *Constructing Authorship in the Work of Günter Grass* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2008), pp. 35–37.

³³ Günter Grass, *Grimms Wörter. Eine Liebeserklärung* (Göttingen: Steidl 2010).

were – who receive his particular attention. All this serves as a reminder that the idea of German nationhood originated in a sense of cultural community, which found its expression not least in literature. This idea of a *Kulturnation* was there long before the political process of nation building took its disastrous course. Overemphasis of the tradition of *Kulturnation* has, with good reason, been charged with being partially responsible for the intellectual quietism that contributed to the collapse of democracy in the Weimar years and, indeed, one aim of the *Gruppe 47* was to correct this failing for the future. Günter Grass of course was always quite the opposite of a quietist. But there is a hint of nostalgia for the lost innocence of the *Kulturnation* running through Grass's later writing. In his playful resuscitation of older German literature Grass brings his own international reputation into play, thereby contributing to the revival of that literary tradition's prestige.