

Günter Grass and the German Collective Memory

Since the end of WWII most German authors have been dealing with Germany's war past and with the holocaust. Moral premises of German war narrative were postulated as early as in 1946 by Karl Jaspers. In his treatise Die Schuldfrage (The Question of Guilt) Jaspers dismisses the anonymity of collective guilt and calls for the responsibility for the war crimes and for the holocaust on an individual level. His voice was silenced by the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) of Germany in the fifties. In the early sixties the trial with Eichman in Jerusalem (1961) and Hannah Arendt's consequent book (Eichman in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil, 1963), re-opened questions about individual guilt for the war and the holocaust. One of the most relevant precursors for the articulation of the war narrative by German "left" was Grass's novel The Tin Drum published in 1956.

In the past few years some German authors, for instance Martin Walser, have voiced an opinion that Germans have been preoccupied with the negative sentiments about their recent past and, as a result, that they can no longer reflect upon it. (Walser's speech at the occasion of receiving the "Peace Prize of German Book Trade" in 1998). The others, among them Günter Grass being the most influential, maintain that dealing with the past is a never-ending process in which every return renders a different picture, a different story about the past events. Grass's two literary returns to the (pre)war history of German expatriates in East Prussia, (occupied Polish territories), the novel The Tin Drum (1956) and the novella, Crabwalk (2002), indeed offer two different accounts of the past.

We may ask what prompts this "eternal recurrence", the never-ending return to the past events? French philosopher Paul Ricoeur would suggest that it is the *reality* of the past events which is always absent in our interpretation. Past event survives in the present by *leaving a trace*, the trace hence stands for the past, it represents it but not in the sense of "*Vorstellung*", of a direct representation in mind, but in an indirect sense of "*Vertretung*", as a trace which *takes place of the past* but is not *identical* with it. According to Ricoeur the trace is the *absent* past, it can only appear to fill the void left by the past events. Absence of the past is, at the same time, always an absence of particular memories. Ricoeur reserves this kind of hermeneutic of the past exclusively to historical texts and to the work of historian who owns an immense debt with respect to the past. I would like to show that literary text which deals with the history can have the same indebtedness to the past events. It can be motivated by the same need for the "unending rectification of our positions towards the past." (Ricoeur; 2)

What then goads our never-ending return to the past? Grass would answer that it is that what is absent in the story. In his recent return to the war memories Grass recalls the suppressed experiences of those Germans who suffered during WWII. It is a rather controversial return in that it contrasts the narrative of German war guilt which has been perpetuating German post-war history since the sixties. These memories would be easier to dismiss had they not been brought up by a leftist intellectual whose earlier novel, The Tin Drum, was one of the cornerstones of the narrative about German war guilt.

In The Tin Drum Grass renders a critical account of the war past of German minority in Poland. The book is an Odyssey of the main character, dwarfish Oskar Matzerath, a half German and a half Kashubian-Pole, who was born and raised in the

pre-war city of Gdansk. The book reveals how seemingly apolitical German petty bourgeoisie latently worked as a political vehicle of National Socialism. In Oskar's memories Gdansk has always been associated with the Nazi past of his German compatriots, his supposed father not being an exception. In the end of the novel Grass describes Oskar's life-long journey as of someone who "was born under light bulbs, deliberately stopped growing at age of three, given drum, sang glasses to pieces, observed ants, decided to grow, buried drum, emigrated to the West, lost the East, learned stonecutter's trade, worked as a model, started drumming again, made money, kept finger, gave it away, drove up escalators, arrested, convicted, sent to mental hospital, soon to be acquitted, celebrating his thirtieth birthday and still afraid of "Black Witch." (The Tin Drum :544). Grass leaves Oskar to the spitefulness of his guilt feeling. Grass "condemns" Oskar to his "existential uncertainty" of facing the "Black Witch" or, in other words, of living the life burdened with the guilt. In the very end of the book Oskar is saying: "Don't ask Oskar who [the Black Witch] is. Words fail me. First she was behind me, later she kissed my hump, but now, now and forever, she is in front of me, coming closer." (Drum; 546) I would argue that the end of the novel, dating back to 1956, is the symbolic beginning of the narrative of guilt which, according to Grass, Germans are destined to face.

Grass's latest return to the war past renders an alternative look at the fates of some Germans as the victims of war. In *Crabwalk* (2002), Grass addresses long-buried wartime memories of the sinking of German ship carrying thousands of German refugees by a Soviet submarine. The main characters of the novella are Tulla, one of the survivors of the sunken ship and her grandson Konny, to whom she passes her memories. The plot, partly also situated in Poland, is centred around the ship named in the commemoration of a Nazi general Gustloff assassinated by a Jew. Tulla's memories about the ship enchant and inspire Konny who designs a neo-Nazi chat room where he names himself after the Nazi general and where he meets David who identifies himself as a Jew. Konny's father, a liberal journalist, watches with alarm as the two arrange to meet. In a place which was a former monument to the assassinated general Konny carries out his plan and shoots David 4 times, just as the assassin David Frankfurter shot Gustloff in 1936. Konny does so for the assassinated general, for the vilification of his country, for the injustice done to his grandmother whose memories were not permitted in the former East Germany and highly undesired in the Western part. The absurdity of Konny's act reaches its climax in the revelation that his victim was not a Jew.

Protagonists of both novels, Oskar and Tulla, recall Polish city of Gdansk as a place of their childhood evoking similar memories. In both novels Grass gives a rather unflattering account of German expatriates, casually greeting themselves with 'heil Hitler'. Oskar's father is a thoughtless follower of Nazism, enchanted and elevated by the idea of a big Germany. Tulla's parents are working-class 'ordinary' citizens who can endlessly appreciate the benefits of a Nazi organisation "KDF" (Kraft durch Freude/Strength through Joy) which, after the Nazi putsch, took over the membership base of the dismantled Labour Front. Tulla grew up with her parents' incessant eulogy of the ship and of their sail trip shortly before the outbreak of WWII. The liner Gustloff was the pride of "Strength through Joy" organisation and it exemplified major virtues valued by Tulla's parents: her mother praised the beauty of the ship, the father its classless character. However, Tulla's own encounter with the liner Gustloff was quite different.

When Tulla, who was 8 months pregnant, embarked together with other Germans fleeing East Prussia on Gustloff in the winter 1945, it was in order to witness the ship's end. The day after the ship left the pier in Gdansk it was torpedoed by Soviet submarine and left around 6,600 death, most of whom were infants, children, women and wounded soldiers, including Poles and Croats. Men, Grass notices, were saved in "embarrassedly large number."

What does Grass's text say and whom does it speak to? The narrator is Tulla's son, a journalist who early emigrated to the Western Germany and who, throughout his entire life, kept silent about his mother's memories. Being unsuccessful with the son Tulla turns to her grandson who was raised by his mother in a strong left-wing liberal tradition, firmly anchored in the narrative about German guilt. "What went wrong?", asks himself Konny's father in the courtroom during the trial with his son. Can everything be blamed on "Mother", this old witch whose hair turned white when she saw all the little children, "drawn in icy waters, with their legs popping out,...when she heard a collective cry of death – A cry like that you won't ever get it out of your ear..." (Crabwalk; 155). Was it Konny's mother who in the courtroom adhered to her positions strictly opposing "any attempt to portray pseudo-Nazi ideology as innocuous?" (Crabwalk; 198). For the same reason Konny's mother neither interfere nor did she allow her ex-husband to interject into a school's "banning report" which prohibited their son to give a speech in the history class about the positive legacy of Nazi organisation "Strength through Joy". Are the teachers to blame? One from the former GDR, where Konny transferred to school when he moved to his Grandmother, "emphasised his school's antifascist tradition, while all that occurred to the West German teacher was the fairly overused Ovid quotation – Beware the beginnings!" (Crabwalk; 203).

While the final scene of *The Tin Drum* where Oskar is haunted by the "Black Witch" epitomises the beginning of guilt narrative, I would argue that in *Crabwalk* the scene in the courtroom marks the moment of its transformation. Grass engages the voices of the main protagonists, Tulla and Konny, in the dialogue with the narrative of German guilt. He lets Tulla to tell her story in the public for the first time in her life. Konny even managed to get rid of otherwise frequent anti-Semitic rhetoric in his chat room. To his adversary Wolfgang, who adopted the name of the assassin David and built, what he believed to be a Jewish identity of a victim, Konny gave a credit for rectifying information posted on his website. He acknowledged motives of Gustloff's assassin David Frankfurter and approved of his later career of a state official in Israel. He equally approved of the belated honour of Russian submarine captain Marinesko who torpedoed the ship and who had later drunken himself to death. Every country has its heroes and so should Germany. The unpaid tribute to the Nazi general Gustloff was at stake for Konny. In his intelligent but more so sinister neo-Nazi speech Konny reveals that "only through a restored Gustloff's monument can Germany free itself from the Jewish yoke." (Crabwalk; 207)

I would argue that in the courtroom speeches Grass exposes the limits of intelligibility of guilt narrative as it speaks to various actors. Konny's mother, who is determined to preserve the account of the war past untainted by Tulla's tricky memories, is of no help to Konny. He is left to his resentment and confusion as he was prohibited from "presenting [at school] his view of the 'neglect of monuments' and of the social significance of the Nazi organisation Strength through Joy". Similarly, Tulla is not

grasping, or not willing to, that her memories foster her grandson's right-wing advancements. Yet, Grass offers a putative answer as for the re-iteration of German war past when he allows an old man, another survivor from the liner *Gustloff*, to speak: "Never, he said, should his generation have kept silent about such misery, merely because its own sense of guilt was so overwhelming, merely because for years the need to accept responsibility and show remorse took precedence, with the result that they abandoned the topic to the right wing. This failure, he says, was staggering..." (Crabwalk; 103).

Question posed in *Crabwalk*, namely how to deal with the war suffering of some Germans in the context of German guilt, has an unmistakable hermeneutic dimension. What is the hermeneutic of the past in *Crabwalk*? How are the past events seen through Grass's lenses? Ricoeur argues that hermeneutic approach to the past unfolds in three steps or through the three 'great classes': of the *Same*, the *Other* and the *Analogue*. First two classes Ricoeur borrows from Plato's dialogues with the Sophists, the last one is Ricoeur's own expansion of ancient hermeneutics.

The Same is, according to Ricoeur, synonymous with the *re-enactment* of the past through re-thinking it. However, what we rethink is not the past event in its reality but the *trace* that the event leaves in the present. (Ricoeur; 11) The trace is captured in the story, it circulates within the tradition, it is re-thought and re-told from the perspective of the *present* which is the only perspective that we have at our disposal. Therefore, re-enactment of the past event is never identical with its original course, nor is the re-living of the primary experience possible. In *Crabwalk*, when Tulla strives to re-live her past experiences by talking about them on limited occasions, her memory fails her. She cannot recall when exactly was her son born (was it still on *Gustloff* or on the submarine that rescued them), when did her hair turn white, how many infants were saved, etc? For Konny is the re-enactment even less possible though he, with a meticulous precision, gathers 'objective' and the most accurate data about the ship and about its glorious and unfortunate past. Nor Wolfgang, alias David, can relive the life of David Frankfurter, assassin of Nazi general, or adopt his Jewish identity. Wolfgang's trajectory toward an epitome of victim remains incomprehensible to his own parents, who wonder, why their son changed his name to David, asked for menorah, started wearing a little cap of religious Jews. "His endless talk of David and Goliath had been silly, but apparently it was a serious matter to him." (Crabwalk; 200).

But what exactly is re-thinking of the past? Ricoeur maintains that rethinking is not a direct process but that it takes the "detour through imagination" which, in return, is formed by our lived experience. (Ricoeur; 8). Because of the conspicuously present character of imagination, tradition is never accepted as unproblematic, it cannot be received unquestioned. Wolfgang's parents listened with astonishment to Tulla's story, Konny's father questioned the legitimacy of the firmness with which his ex-wife and his son's teachers held on to the traditional narrative of German war past with no room for his mother's memories. He even begins to doubt his own resistance to his mother's story which, to him, has been her "incessant nagging". (Crabwalk; 1). The trace of the past event survives in us even though we reject it. This, according to Ricoeur, is possible within the second great class, that of the *Other*, or of the *distanciation* from the past. There the past is being put at distance and interpreted as that what is *different* from the present, as the present's missing *other*. Ricoeur calls this lack or non-appearance of the past in the present a "pertinent absence". Pertinent because the absent past acts upon our

present, it calls to be told in the stories and it calls for the stories to be reiterated. The absent past in *Crabwalk* has two dimensions: one is Ricoeurian absence of the reality of the past. The events disappeared but left the trace which has been re-told in German post-war narrative. The second dimension are the suppressed memories of those Germans who suffered during the WWII, which have been left-out from the narrative articulated in the sixties.

But can the past be told at all? And how then can it be told if we can neither re-enact it, or only to a limited degree, nor can we cancel out our temporal distance from it? Ricoeur argues that the presence and the absence of the past, that its being and its non-being can be conjoined by the third class, that of the *Analogue* (similar). Past as the *Same* is present through the *trace taking the place of* “the event that once was living and real”. (Ricoeur; 24). Past as the *Other* is absent in a form of *distance* from the past events. This distance is both temporal and phenomenological, the latter meaning the detachment from the experiences of the others. Ricoeur maintains that the presence and the absence of the past can be brought together through analogy or similarity, when the past appears not as a fixed representation but in a form of *being-as*. If the event is told in a narrative, the “things must have happened as it is stated in the narrative.” (Ibid; 33) This *being-as* of the past event is brought to language as a figure or a trope. The interpretation of the past reaches beyond the semantics (or the contextual meaning) of a word or a sentence into the whole text. It is no longer only the context of the sentences but the context of the *whole text* that represents the past event, that renders its meaning to us. The meaning of the past is encoded in a particular *trope* which we choose to tell the story. Ricoeur uses Hayden White’s notion that historical accounts are presented through four tropes – metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony, each of them having an expressly *representative* function. In other words, it is no longer merely the epistemology of the event, as a collection of historical facts, but the tone of the narrative, the chosen “figure”, being it metaphor, metonymy, etc., which opens, or closes our access to the past events.

I am not going to explain Hayden White’s typology of the tropes in historical discourse but I will only mention its two main aspects. The trope, or the figure always precedes the narrative. Ricoeur claims that though the intention always is to tell what really happened, the story is continuously *prefigured*, it is preceded by the trope which will shape the narrative. In this respect, the nature of the trope is particularly important in that it determines our awareness of two things: that the story is by no means complete, that there will always be something missing in it, and that in the narrative the past is present to us as a *representation* of the real events, not as their archetype. Second, it is the difference in a degree of confinement which different tropes offer. Ricoeur considers irony to be the most reflective form of speech in that it introduces a negative note a “second thought” or a doubt into the narrative. Irony “continually recalls the problematic nature of language as whole” (31).

A glance back at Grass’s *Crabwalk* reveals a subtle but undoubtedly ironic tone of his book. The speeches in the courtroom, the confusion of the parents of Konny and Wolfgang (alias David), and a strikingly successful adaptation of Konny to the prison, even his promising career of a software specialist.

In *Crabwalk* Grass is again pre-figuring the narrative about the war, as he did in *The Tin Drum*. Attentive reader may even notice what will be, or will continue to be

absent in the reiterated narrative, which is given in an allusion to the speech of Konny's defence attorney. (212)

In a minor disagreement with Ricoeur, I would argue that not only can have a literary return to the past the same indebtedness to the past as the historical one, moreover that the literary text has the power and the potential to pre-configure the historical account.

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