

## GÜNTER GRASS AND THE PIRATES:

## The stuff of myth and

Should my reference to pirates suggest a swashbuckling comparison of our German author with the *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Günter with a patch over one eye, brandishing a saber, and wearing three-league boots), I will immediately disappoint. Rather than scanning an emerald Caribbean seascape for literal pirates, Grass invites us to wonder at a Baltic setting where the question of who we can call a pirate depends on the stories we use to set and hold our own borders.<sup>1</sup> Pirates, pirating, piracy – these are words that may also be applied to the ways in which the stories we use to demarcate space and fix history themselves result from using the stories of others. From such a vantage point, *The Flounder* challenges the pretense and shows the inadequacy of any single controlling idea of history.<sup>2</sup> Although often ignored today, the novel invites conjectures on the trajectory of Grass's work in regard to the retelling of history, or even on history itself.<sup>3</sup> While such questions were important when the book was published, they are even more relevant at a time when we continue to adjust to shifting borders. Since a trial is the major structuring event of the novel, it also provides a starting point for an examination of how literature inevitably becomes part of revealing or concealing crimes, which come to be understood as either against society or against the heart. Efforts to examine Günter Grass's own prolonged silence regarding his association with the Waffen-SS as a teenager make the question of writing as a vehicle of history and confession still more pressing. In a novel that can be read as the transcript of a trial, we may ask precisely who is on trial, just as we are continually tempted to ask our fellow spectators in the courtroom, what is the crime?

### Fabulae

Published in 1977, as Grass's gift to himself on his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, *The Flounder* has been found difficult to read, and even a misadventure. The title comes from the fairy tale "*The Fisherman and His Wife*" (Von dem Fischer un syner Fru) collected by the brothers Grimm.<sup>4</sup> The tale recounts the story of a man who catches a fish that asks to be returned to the sea. If he is returned to the sea, the fish promises, he will grant any wish. When the man tells his wife what has happened, she scolds him in disbelief for losing a good fish. To her astonishment, the woman discovers that the fish indeed is magic ("ik bün 'n verwünschten Prins") and grants wishes. She asks for more and more (cottage, castle, papacy, and kingdom) but finally when she asks for the sun and moon, she loses everything she has gained and is returned to her hovel in a place named Pisspot. In Grass's version, the Flounder is caught by three



"Butt Im Griff", statue by Günter Grass in the Danish city Sonderborg. Photo: arne.list/Flickr

young women who represent the women's liberation movement.<sup>5</sup> Instead of returning the fish to the sea, they place the fish on trial for subverting a matriarchal order of culture and civilization.

**There was once a Flounder. He was just like the one in the fairy tale. When one day some women who had caught him hauled him before a tribunal, he resolved not to say a word, but only to lie flat, mute, much-wrinkled, and old as the hills in his zinc tub. But after a while his thunderous silence bored him, and he began to play with his pectoral fins. And when Sieglinde Huntscha, the prosecutor, came straight to the point and asked him whether he had deliberately circulated the Low German fairy tale "The Fisherman and His Wife" as a means of minimizing the importance of the advisory activity that he had demonstrably been carrying on since the Neolithic era, by maliciously and tendentiously distorting the truth at the expense of the fisherman's wife Ilsebill, his crooked mouth couldn't help opening and pouring out speech.**

The novel evolves as an extensive report of testimony given at the trial, which is held in a movie theater. It is a show-trial, or a grand jury hearing in which the reader is invited to judge whether there is sufficient evidence for an indictment. Since the Flounder is on trial for transforming history itself, historic persons are called to the movie theater courtroom to testify.

With great irony, the reader becomes a witness to a trial that at once probes fable, historical evidence, and the ephemeral nature of all narrative.

### Examining Baltic Sea histories

The witnesses gathered at the movie theater trial turn the Baltic into a *Schauplatz* to re-imagine history itself. Herder reminds us that the Baltic shoreline is an intellectual network that permitted work on the relation between languages and history. His allusion to the Baltic as a *Zwischenlandschaft* describes the space that he himself inhabited and that Grass also occupies.<sup>6</sup> As testimonies are received, we move through layers of northern history. The prehistoric period allows Grass to describe the herding of reindeer and hunting and gathering. It also permits him to describe the matriarchal structure that shaped religious practice through the integration of food and sexual reproduction; the subsequent contact between peoples brought about the comparison and development of

weaponry. The novel recounts further the incursion of the Teutonic Knights, the Hanseatic League, the Polish wars, the Reformation, the appearances of the Swedes, the continuous disruption of the Thirty Years' War, the Napoleonic Wars, and the Franco-Prussian Wars. Swedes appear again and again, as if Danzig were the muddy backyard of Sweden. The history, preparation, and consumption of food, and the consequences of its consumption, are recounted in detail. The most attended sessions of the trial are the ones in which the Flounder includes recipes in his testimony. A consideration of the genres of German literature is brought together with recipes for cooking flounder.

As the trial proceeds, the Flounder describes the *Weltgeist* that emerges from the continuous interplay of story-telling that ultimately makes up history. But the stories are not those of lost manuscripts or histories in academic form. They are everyday narratives that have never seen the light of day. Grass follows narratives as they hatch and lead to a proliferation of other narratives. These *fabulae* continue to reproduce and are like mushrooms that must be found, identified, and cooked. Rather than fixing attention on stories that might be associated with grand myths or master narratives, Grass asks what we might do with the small myths that we live with daily. We are left with the multiplication of stories used to prevaricate, reveal, and conceal. The *Weltgeist* of the Flounder is not attired in the guise of Hegel's *Weltgeist*, but in that of a joker or trickster who always has another recipe up his sleeve. This is a phenomenology, not of the spirit, but of the kitchen.

# the Baltic Sea

by **Kenneth J. Knoespel**

## Self-interrogation in suspense

Grass's own personal stories interrupt the veneer of historical narrative in such kitchen phenomenology. Overwhelmed by the exhausting trial, the Flounder hides in the mud at the bottom of the large glass tank that has replaced the zinc bathtub and refuses to speak. The narrator too, obligated by a scheduled promotional trip to India, interrupts the trial to give a graphic documentary account of his own reactions to starvation in the subcontinent. India offers an ironic respite in the middle of the trial and constructs a space from which we may look back at the Baltic. But the trip to India is so debilitating that Grass must cut it short because of diarrhea and outright fatigue. (Grass deliberately documents his own confession of being utterly overwhelmed by India.) The episode allows Grass to bring into the open his own impotence as world-renowned writer in the face of starvation in the world. It also shows how poverty and starvation in India may be used to escape the stench under our own noses. Here, in a reversal of a missionary morality, the Baltic becomes India. But as readers searching for incriminating evidence in the Flounder's trial, the disruption of the India narrative also makes us ask whether something else might be at stake as well. Although the trial portrayed in Danzig is interrupted, we as members of the grand jury may wonder whether the trip also hints at another confession.

Returning to the Danzig trial, we inevitably ask whether there is more to the shadow play of interpretation that both reveals and conceals. In 1977, the crime investigation leads to suspicion regarding the meta-histories used to order and silence the patchwork of stories that make up history. But in the end, incriminating evidence is not found in a single meta-narrative: rather, history itself appears as a testimony of crimes constituted by the ways in which histories are written and rewritten. As fable, history, documentary, personal biography, poetry, and recipes are set before us, we wonder along with the narrator what crime we are really being asked to investigate and how we ourselves may be complicit in the evidence brought forth. In interrogating the Flounder, we interrogate ourselves and the authorities invoked to give credence to one story over another. In an interview in 2006, after the revelation of his affiliation with the Waffen-SS, Grass links self-interrogation and indirect forms of confession with the process of literary writing:

**Es ist ja eine Binsenwahrheit, daß unsere Erinnerungen, unsere Selbstbilder trügerisch sein können und es oft auch sind. Wir beschönigen, dramatisieren, lassen Erlebnisse zur Anekdote zusammenschnurren. Und all das, also auch das Fragwürdige, das alle literarischen Erinnerungen aufweisen, wollte ich schon in der Form durchscheinen und anklagen lassen. Deshalb die Zwiebel. Beim Enthäuten**

*der Zwiebel, also beim Schreiben, wird Haut für Haut, Satz um Satz etwas deutlich und ablesbar, da wird Verschollenes wieder lebendig.*<sup>7</sup>

Reading *The Flounder* with *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* in mind, one might argue that Grass, by lending his voice to the Flounder, reveals himself repeatedly, only to hide in the mud and wait to be uncovered again. In this way his novels become a hermeneutics of confession in suspense.<sup>8</sup> But the forensic hermeneutics set in play by Grass do not end with Grass, but nag the reader to ask again and again what crime has been committed and whether something more has been concealed. Through the repeated interrogation of established histories, indirectly including Grass's own, the novel works as a continuous appeal to confession in which solving the "crimes" of history results only in further stories and their interpretations. The alibis used in a detective novel or in a military trial may seem to disappear when a common plot line comes to light, but such a closure may also unravel. For Grass, the knitting and unraveling of stories shape the long wake of his narrative journey through the Baltic with *the Flounder*. Rather than the epic grandeur of an Odysseus, Grass builds a piratical anti-epic that incites us to listen to fish tales from the Baltic.

## The Baltic space

Grass's *Flounder* contributes to our work of locating, dislocating, and relocating literature in the Baltic Sea region by challenging us to give attention to the lost or hidden stories that are ignored or played off against each other in the official versions of history that would fix our position in space. While Grass counters the seduction of the big story – universal history – he also reveals himself by getting caught in the contradiction of his own storytelling. Well beyond its own narrative terrain and Grass's confessional mode, the novel works as a tool kit for unraveling Baltic Sea landscapes. Just as Grass himself intrudes in the story of the Flounder through his documentary confession of a trip to India, he invites us to play through our own histories. His efforts to give speech to the organic – to mushrooms, trees, blood, the smell of soup and the stink of sewage – often appear as an antidote to our susceptibility to be duped by abstraction or allegory. For the study of literature from the Baltic Sea region, the challenge of small, local stories is enormous. It is also important. For this truly is a "Zwischenlandschaft", covered by the tracks of armies and the ways by which ordinary people have sought to save themselves, reveal themselves, and hide themselves by telling stories. ✘

Note: All essays are scholarly articles and have been peer-reviewed by specialists under supervision of Baltic Worlds' editorial advisory board.

## references

- 1 The matter of pirates in the Baltic need not be viewed as a Disneyesque allusion. The 18<sup>th</sup> century exploration of German origins, especially in light of the reception of Icelandic sagas and in debates over the Norman thesis of Russian origins, leads historians such as August Schlözer to ask whether German origins may be found in *die Piraten* or *die Nomanden*. On pirates in the Baltic see also Dirk Meier, *Seefahrer, Händler und Piraten im Mittelalter*, Ostfildern 2004: JanThorbecke Verlag.
- 2 References are to Günter Grass, *The Flounder*, New York 1978: Fawcett Crest; see also Günter Grass, *Der Butt*, Darmstadt 1987: Luchterhand [1977].
- 3 Grass scholarship has emphasized theoretical questions of historiography from the beginning. For an important review see David Jenkinson, "Conceptions of History", in *Günter Grass's Der Butt: Sexual Politics and the Male Myth of History*, Philip Brady, T. McFarland, & J. J. White (ed.), Oxford 1990: Clarendon, pp. 51-68. See also the critical essays and bibliography in *The Fisherman and His Wife: Günter Grass's The Flounder in Critical Perspective*, Siegfried Mews (ed.), New York 1983: AMS Press.
- 4 Brüder Grimm, *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, vol. 1, Stuttgart 2010: Reclam (1980), Tale 19, pp. 119-127.
- 5 The novel's satire of the feminist movement in the 1970s has given rise to several analyses from the vantage point of gender studies. It should also be seen in the much broader political climate of the 1970s. Grass repeatedly portrays political action being thwarted or blocked by a proliferation of personal agendas.
- 6 See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, Stuttgart 1990: Reclam [1774], pp. 40-78.
- 7 His memoir is titled *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*. "Mein Schweigen über all die Jahre zählt zu den Gründen, warum ich dieses Buch geschrieben habe. Das mußte raus, endlich." Günter Grass in conversation with Frank Schirrmacher and Hubert Spiegel, 2006-08-11.
- 8 The Niobe episode in *Die Blechtrommel* may be compared to the revelatory acts of story-telling in *The Flounder*. Niobe is the wooden bowsprit from a Florentine galleon captured by the Danzig pirates Paul Beneke and Martin Badewiek in 1473. Over the centuries, the much prized Niobe is stolen, hidden, and eventually located in a museum. Each phase of Niobe's "Baltic translation" provokes miracles and disasters that originate from an act of piracy. Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, New York 1964: Crest [1962], pp. 173-187; *Die Blechtrommel*, Frankfurt am Main 1962: Fischer [1960], pp. 148-159.