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On Two Interviews Between Günter Grass and Ōe Kenzaburō

By REIKO TACHIBANA NEMOTO

The German novelist Günter Grass (b. 1927) and the Japanese novelist Ōe Kenzaburō (b. 1935), both of whom are equally well known as political activists and writers, have met twice for interviews, once in Japan in 1978 and again in Germany in 1990.[1] Since neither speaks the other's language, they conversed through an interpreter (Iwabuchi Tatsuji in 1978, Mishima Ken'ichi in 1990). Those interviews, published in Japanese, seem to have remained little known among Western scholars.[2] My purpose here is to point out that the interviews record Grass's and Ōe's extremely similar attitudes toward literature and their mutual understanding of the writer's position in society.[3]

In the 1978 interview, entitled "Literature and the War Experience," Grass and Ōe discuss the literary techniques and methods each had been using to describe what they saw as the overwhelming and incomplete past and the writer's responsibility to speak out. Ōe opens the session by saying that although he lacks expertise on German literature and history, the publisher Chuokoronsha has chosen him to talk with Grass during the latter's visit to Japan, "probably because I am the first Japanese writer to review the Japanese translations of Grass's works, and I have reviewed most of them and been deeply moved by them" (312). Grass, in response, comments that he was very surprised to find out that his works, such as *The Tin Drum*, *Cat and Mouse*, and *Dog Years* (together constituting the Danzig Trilogy), were being widely read in Japan. He wants to know "why those works, whose setting is my hometown of Danzig, now Polish Gdańsk, are so comprehensible to the Japanese audience" (313). Ōe explains that in Grass's descriptions a specific locale can, paradoxically, have universal appeal; readers can identify with the skillful writer's hometown even if they have never been there. Ōe states that Japanese literature and culture have characteristically stressed not regionalism but centralization, a tendency which, during modernization, has led the Japanese to follow the West as the core of culture. However, a concern for cultural regionalism has increased lately, and Grass's use of locality in his fiction has stimulated Japanese writers and intellectuals. Grass responds that, as demonstrated in the works of William Faulkner and James Joyce, the use of regionalism in literature is not new. For Grass, it is the only means of portraying the recent past: "In order to face the problem of the Third Reich, I need to re-create the memory of my childhood in my hometown" (314).

In addition to regionalism, a recurrent topic in the 1978 interview is the literary motif of the clown. Ōe points out Grass's depiction of marginal children within "an upside-down world in which children have more power than adults, clowns more power than kings, peripherals more power than centrals" (316). According to Grass, the child's viewpoint and the power given to child and clown figures over adults in his works derives from the tradition of the picaresque novel, whose protagonist is usually a tragicomic figure, as in Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus*. Grass regards this genre as "the source of European literature, since, though born in sixteenth-century Spain, it goes beyond the boundaries of national literatures" (320). As a modern example of this genre, Grass mentions *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), by his favorite author, Alfred Döblin. Furthermore, Grass finds that Ōe's short story "Shiiku" (Prize Stock, 1958), which is written from a child's perspective, resembles his own style in the Danzig Trilogy.

Ōe agrees, admitting Grass's influence on his later works, in which a retarded child is frequently presented,[4] but enlarging the context of the influences upon him to include "Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of grotesque realism and carnival, and the power of the clown, which is the groundwork for the imaginative power found in my fictions" (321). For Ōe, the mythological prototype of the clown is Hermes, "who as a child god disturbs the world through his mischief" (321). By employing a clown figure like Hermes, Ōe intends to create a new type of literature in order to "turn conventional situations upside down" (321).

Grass questions the adequacy of Ōe's Hermes concept, objecting, "I cannot agree that Hermes is to be labeled merely as a prototype of the clown. I rather consider him as a more complicated, polysemous figure, like Don Quixote. As a god of commerce, Hermes is naïve, irrational, and has a Dionysian element, on the one hand, but is rational and witty on the other" (321–22). Emphasizing the significance of

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"polysemy and ambivalence in literature" (321), Grass explains that he creates his own version of Hermes, who has opposing positive and negative elements. For example, in *The Tin Drum*'s sole narrator, the "permanently" three-year-old Oskar Matzerath, who "has a clownish character" but also "a negative feature, that is, he is infantile," Grass intends to present "the image of the clown as well as infantilism in the Third Reich" (322). Oskar's infantilism, which is "connected to criminal acts," leads to stealing, killing people directly or indirectly, and adultery.

The clown who suggests criminality moves the interview to the issue of political involvement. In addition to his acknowledgment of Grass's "genuine" quality as a writer, Ōe regards him as "one of the few writers who succeeds in political *engagement*" (316). According to Grass, Auschwitz has made political neutrality in literature unacceptable, and thus a contemporary author must take sides. Involvement in politics, however, can cause a writer's style to become "rough" or tainted by the need to communicate to both political and literary audiences. Despite this danger, Grass says that he continues to be active in politics, because he believes he cannot stand aside: "The Weimar Republic collapsed due to the indifference of intellectuals and writers toward politics" (318). Aware of the risks of engagement, Grass consciously differentiates between politicians/politics and writers/literature: "Unlike politicians, writers exaggerate—that is, concentrate on details, play with words, are spontaneous, and are capable of intoxication with the political imagination. . . . Literature never permits compromise and has an anarchistic character, whereas democratic politics cannot avoid compromise and political acts must affirm something while compromising" (316). One person can enact both roles: Grass participates in politics "not as a writer who speaks for the conscience of the people from above, but as a *citoyen* [citizen] who pays taxes and sends children to school" (317).

Courtesy: Shinchōsha Company

Ōe Kenzaburō

Throughout the interview Grass emphasizes Germany's guilt and responsibility for crimes committed during the Third Reich. He recounts his own experiences in the war: "I was drafted into the army at the age of sixteen and fought against the Red Army for thirty minutes at the end of the war. In the battle half of my troops, most of them around my age, sixteen or seventeen years old, were killed. Since then, I cannot help thinking that I have been living by chance and writing about the war's madness and destructive power on behalf of its dead, many of whom could have been gifted had they lived" (323). Therefore, Grass believes that his literary works are "not his own production, but those of his contemporaries" (323). He adds that German as well as Austrian and Swiss writers are addressing the problem of responsibility for the war and its crimes through their works.

Ōe, on the other hand, acknowledges that Japanese authors tend to consider themselves as victims rather than as victimizers: "They believe that the atomic bombardment of Hiroshima and Nagasaki wiped out Imperial Japan's atrocities" (326). Ōe continues: "Ironically, the first Japanese to acknowledge responsibility for the war, by saying that they were the fascists who invaded China, were the second generation of *hibakusha*" (survivors of the atomic bombs; 326). Ōe believes that to learn the lessons of the past, Japanese writers should talk with Chinese writers and intellectuals about Imperial Japan's activities in Asia during the war.

Grass and Ōe agree that since Germany and Japan have had similar recent social histories, undergoing the rise of fascism, defeat in World War II, the movement toward materialism, and a rapid economic recovery in the postwar world, the two countries' postwar literatures share common elements. Grass concludes the interview by saying that reading Japanese literature would be fruitful for German authors; however, the availability of Japanese literature in translation in Germany is so limited that there is little opportunity to do so; for example, he has had to read Ōe's *Kojin teki no taiken* (1964; Eng. *A Personal Matter*) in English.

In the 1990 public interview, entitled "The Contemporary Age in Germany and Japan: Diversity, Experience, and Literature," which was held in Frankfurt twelve years after the two writers' first encounter and one day after the reunification of Germany, Ōe tells Grass how popular *The Tin Drum*

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has become in Japan in the interim and how strong an impression Oskar has left on Japanese readers. For instance, when one of Ōe's friends mentioned that he knew a Noh player who could shatter glass with his voice, they immediately and simultaneously shouted at each other, "He's a Japanese Oskar!" Among Ōe's friends, "She or he is like Oskar" has become a common phrase (293). Ōe then mentions that this Noh player, the "Japanese Oskar," coincidentally performed in Frankfurt two days earlier. Grass notes that his fictional Oskar has thus become a "reality" and comments, "This episode makes me understand the meaning of literature" (294). The boundary between fiction and reality has been blurred; bridging this boundary is the intention of literature.

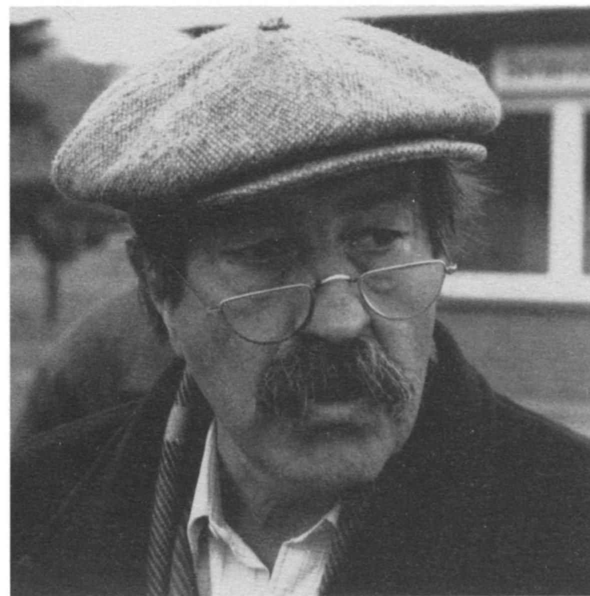
The 1990 interview expands the ideas of regionalism and polysemy in literature that were raised in the 1978 session, along with emphasizing the danger of political centralization in both countries. Grass now recollects his trip to Japan twelve years ago:

> When I was in Japan, I went to Shikoku (Ōe's hometown) and realized what an innocent image I had had of Japan. I had known Japan only as the economic giant. However, in the remote village of Shikoku, for instance, local tradition and culture have been preserved, and no trace of modernity was to be found. I was also astonished to discover that in the department store in Tokyo I heard only European music in the elevator and saw mannequins that did not resemble the Japanese, but rather Europeans (with light skin, blue eyes, and blond hair). I thought there was something "distorted" in the structure of culture in Japan. (294–95).[5]

Ōe, in response, concurs: "When I first came to Tokyo from Shikoku [in the early 1950s], I too was surprised to see blue-eyed and long-legged mannequins in the department stores. Moreover, in Japan today, not only do the big companies use European and American celebrities such as singers, actors, and athletes in their TV commercials, but most of the animation characters also look like Europeans" (297). This phenomenon, according to Ōe, proves that the Japanese people still want to identify themselves with the center of culture, which is, in their mind, the West. As a result, they tend to ignore the diversity of their own culture. However, due to the new theories of the anthropologist Yamaguchi Masao, a focus on peripheral culture and places has now become more prominent, and the popularity in Japan of Grass's regionalist works accords with this change. Just as Ōe remarked on Grass's regionalism in the first interview, Grass now praises the universality of Ōe's *Man'en gannen no futtobōru* (1967; Eng. *The Silent Cry*), whose setting is Shikoku, by saying "I felt as if this story were about my hometown" (295). He adds, "The universality of literature connects two worlds. As Faulkner's novels demonstrate, portraying one's hometown rather than a big city produces world literature" (295).

Despite the significance of locality and regionalism, Grass stresses the importance of "distancing himself" (317) before writing about his own experiences in the Third Reich and postwar Germany. He admits that the question raised in the aftermath of World War II by Theodor Adorno—whether one can write after Auschwitz, or whether it is permissible to write poetry after Auschwitz—always weighs heavily on him. In order to write about the Third Reich, Grass explains that he needed physically and psychologically to be away from Germany. Hence, his first novel, *The Tin Drum*, was born in Paris in 1959. Following his return from Paris, his short play *Die Plebejer proben den Aufstand* (Eng. *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising*), about the 1953 workers' revolt in East Germany that was suppressed by the Russian army, was written in Berlin in 1966. According to Grass, this play caused mixed reactions in Germany and is no longer seen on the German stage. Ironically, the last time he saw it staged was in Calcutta, where, to his surprise, the work had a strong impact on Bengali theater. For instance, the burning of the big statue of Stalin in the first act of the play caused a sensation in the audience, since such acts are not allowed in real life under the Calcutta regime, which is dominated by the Communist Party. As Oskar has become a "reality" in modern Japan, Grass says, "it is a reality that my play, which has been forgotten or assumed to be forgotten in Germany, has met with sympathy in India" (318).

Referring to Johann Gottfried Herder's concept of a "Kultur-Nation," Grass argues that "German culture has always derived its strength from its diversity" (298), though "Herder's concept, which was stressed in the March revolution of 1848 in Frankfurt, was replaced by Bismarck's military nation and has never become a reality in Germany"



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GÜNTER GRASS

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(299). Unification has in fact diminished diversity and has led to cultural disaster. Grass blames the West German people for acting like colonists, not only depriving East Germans of jobs but also attempting to eradicate their culture: "I have been watching the forest die in West and East Germany for two years. . . . I have observed the forest in East Germany perishing while the country itself was dismembered" (300). Grass adds that forty-five years of East German culture, valuable even though produced under a dictatorship, have been ruined: "Isn't it barbarous for the country that calls itself a 'Kultur-Nation' to treat East Germany in such a way?" Grass asks (307).

Such critical eyes directed against his native land cause Grass trouble: "Due to my criticism of my native land, I have been labeled a traitor to my own country" (311), he says.[6] However, he "proudly" accepts this title, because "criticizing all countries except my own would be a crime" as far as he is concerned (311). He openly expresses his rejection of a united Germany, in which that terrible memory of the Third Reich would be easily erased "in the interest of the 'zero point' or new beginning" (303). Mentioning an article in the daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* which announced that "there was a postwar era and literature in Germany, yet we are now standing at the starting point" (303), Grass opposes the tendency to consider 3 October 1990 as the new "zero point." He suggests that a united Germany, an eighty-million-strong "giant" Germany, should maintain its diversity of culture and people: it should have been named something like the "Bund deutscher Länder" (Federation of German States; 299).

Grass's strong objection to the political and cultural centralization of Germany leads to the topic of centralization in Japan. Ōe comments that, like the Germans' desire for a zero point in their reunited country, the Japanese people expect to see the coming of a new age, marked by Emperor Hirohito's death (7 January 1990) and the ascension of the new emperor, Akihito (314).[7] Observing that the Japanese, like the Germans, will now try to bury the unpleasant memory of World War II, Ōe calls this tendency *misogi*, "which means literally the ritual purification that occurs before a Shinto ceremony" (304). According to Ōe, the government intended to reinforce the concept of *misogi* at the new emperor's enthronement, in which Akihito, like his father Hirohito in 1926, "became a 'god' through the Shinto ritual of *onie no matsuri* or the acqusition of divinity" (314).[8] Furthermore, the irreconcilable duality of the emperor's status, as the secular symbol of Japan according to the constitution and as a god in Shinto rite, corresponds to another duality, the attitude toward the military forces: "The Self-Defense Force does not exist according to the constitution, which prohibits any kind of military organization, but it does exist as a real military force, tightly connected with the U.S. through the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty" (313). Ōe calls three factors in contemporary Japan—the Self-Defense Force, the emperor system, and the conservative Liberal Democratic Party—"the Trinity" (314) and accuses these authoritarian elements in Japanese society of erasing the recent past.

Throughout the 1990 interview Grass and Ōe repeatedly express their refusal to accept the concept of a zero point, or *misogi*, which would obliterate the past. This rejection reflects their shared belief in the significance of history. Ōe recounts an episode that took place at a symposium called "Literature at the Turning Point of the World: Japan and Germany," which was held in Japan right before the reunification of Germany. One of the symposium participants, the East German writer Christoph Hein, objected to the title, claiming that the present moment in history cannot be viewed as a turning point or an opening point: "As a continuum of past, present, and future, history causes the writer to experience the present" (303). Grass expresses a similar notion of the past: "For the writer, literary development is possible only from the accumulation of the past" (303), for the writer narrates "against the passage of time" (316). Agreeing with Hein and Grass, Ōe states that "postwar Japanese writers have been living with the ideology of the present within history as the continuation of the past, present, and future" (321).

Among the disturbing proofs of continuity is the resurgence or persistence of ethnic problems. Grass mentions that, during German reunification, acts of hatred against foreigners and Jewish people have increased rapidly; Ōe describes the same type of discrimination against minorities in Japan, where *burakumin*,[9] the Ainu, the Okinawans, and people from mainland Asia are treated unfairly. For instance, Ōe says, "More than six hundred thousand Koreans now live in Japan because they were forced to come here as cheap labor during World War II" (310), and they are still looked down upon. Ōe opposes the Japanese government's "pride" in national homogeneity, insisting, like Grass, that "cultural and national strength lies in diversity; the Japanese should turn their eyes toward the diversity of their own culture and people" (310).

At the end of the 1990 conversation Ōe mentions an interview he gave to a representative of a German broadcasting station, just before coming to Germany, where he was asked whether, after more than thirty years of writing and speaking up, he thinks his efforts are effective. Ōe recalls that he answered, "No, I do not think the world has changed a bit due to my deeds. Still, I will keep on writing and criticizing [the behavior of my compatriots]" (319). Grass agrees, expressing his similar intention: despite the impotence of his endeavors, he "proudly" says, "I will continue to speak up, to the death" (318). Grass concludes the interview by reiterating, "We agree to

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reject the concept of the 'zero point' or new point [once more]. We are clearly demonstrating today that by dragging along the the past, history moves onward toward the future" (323).

These two interviews document Günter Grass's and Ōe Kenzaburō's strong concern for the writer's role in the future of the world. Emphasizing the importance of cultural diversity, their remarkably similar attitudes toward literature and history show a profound distrust of the authoritarian and centralized tendencies visible in their own societies. Their views have remained firm between 1978 and 1990. However, the first interview focuses on literary techniques, such as regionalism, the clown or Hermes figure, and polysemy, whereas the 1990 discussion continues some of those topics but shifts more to politics, due to the drastic changes that have occurred in both countries during the intervening twelve years.

In the 1990 interview, commenting on the television coverage of Germany's reunification, Grass questions the objectivity of the media: "Shown through the filter, reality becomes an image. This picture will be on the air again for the tenth anniversary of reunification. History is then fabricated through the media" (312). He continues, "It is impossible to distinguish between actual reality and the reality presented by the media" (312). His doubts about the objectivity of the media lead to a corresponding question about that of literature. Ōe, in response, says: "In my work I narrate the emperor system, for instance, through my words—that is, it is presented not objectively but subjectively, through my voice and view. This type of narrative illustrates, I believe, the meaning of literature" (314). Referring to Grass's *Tin Drum*, Ōe asserts that the genuine writer's excellence lies in the ability "to express the period through individual voices" (322). Thus the subjectivity of literature is also its value. For Grass and Ōe, the two interviews have given them the chance to establish publicly their sympathy with this literary perspective, as well as to confirm their belief in the importance of writers' political engagement and the need to keep sending ideological messages in their works.

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[1] The first interview, held in Tokyo in the early spring of 1978, when Grass stopped there on a journey to Asia and Africa, was published in *Umi* (Sea), May 1978, pp. 312–27. The second interview, held at the Frankfurt Book Fair on 4 October 1990, was published in *Gunzō* (Group), January 1991, pp. 292–323. Page references appear parenthetically in the text. All translations are my own.

[2] Though the second interview is listed in the brief literary biography appended to Ōe's collected works printed by the Kōdansha publishing company, among them *Genshuku na tsunawatari* (Collected Essays; Tokyo, Kōdansha, 1991), the interviews are not mentioned in major studies of either Grass or Ōe. In the second interview Ōe refers to the first.

[3] For a study of similarities between *The Tin Drum* and Ōe's novel *The Day He Himself Shall Wipe My Tears Away*, see Reiko Tachibana Nemoto, "Grass's *The Tin Drum* and Ōe's *My Tears*: A Study of Convergence," forthcoming in *Contemporary Literature*.

[4] Since 1963, when his first child was born with severe brain damage, Ōe has often employed a retarded child in his works: e.g. *A Personal Matter* (1964) and *The Silent Cry* (1967).

[5] On Grass's experience in Japan, see *Günter Grass: On Writing and Politics, 1967–1983*, Ralph Manheim, tr., New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985, pp. 55–60.

[6] In his essay entitled "A Short Speech by a Rootless Cosmopolitan" Grass tells of his experience in a Hamburg railway station shortly before Christmas of 1990: "A young man approached [me] and called [me] 'a traitor to the fatherland.' . . . The expression, paired with the term 'rootless cosmopolitan'—a term used by the Right, in the thirties, to stigmatize German leftist intellectuals, many of whom were Jewish—belongs to the special vocabulary of German history" (Günter Grass, *Two States—One Nation?*, Krishna Winston with A. S. Wensiger, tr., San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990, p. 1).

[7] The emperor system is the set of cultural values focused on the emperor, who in Shinto mythology is a descendant of the Sun Goddess. The imperial line has reigned through either symbolic or real power since the known beginning of Japanese history in 660 B.C. Ōe's criticism of this system centers on his belief that it functions as "a tool to suppress art and the people's consciousness" (Matsuzaki Haruo, *Demokuratto no bungaku* [Democratic Literature], Tokyo, Shin'nippon, 1981, p. 44).

[8] In the ritual, as the new emperor is sleeping in a special building, the soul of the Imperial Household is supposed to enter his body so that he acquires divinity.

[9] Since medieval Japan, people who engage in "dirty" jobs such as killing animals and washing the dead have been called *eta* or *burakumin* and treated like untouchables. Discrimination against them continues today.

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