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## **The Mythology in *The Tin Drum***

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The hero of the classical epic is distinguished at birth by the gods, educated in trial and ritual, and eventually singled out for a special mission of sacred importance. With time he travels over vast stretches of land or water and into the distant reaches of the cosmos, to Olympus or Hades, heaven or hell. After having passed through a number of trials and adventures in which he has proven his superiority over common men and uncommon monsters, he completes his special mission or quest (knowingly or unknowingly), gains stature as a result, and perhaps loses favour with the gods. (His memory is cherished in any case by members of the community and often a cult is founded on his behalf.) Frequently the hero relates his own story of deeds in battle, cunning exploits, and encounters with strange people in foreign places; but always on a larger tableau of epic unity the supernatural powers participate in his fate at their pleasure and by design. From beginning to end the gods themselves or their divine machinations prepare, encourage, and guide the hero in his travels along some predetermined path. Each and every one of these epic conventions is present in *The Tin Drum* but in large measure it is the last element, a unique and persuasive mythology, that gives this novel its essential character. Without a convincing mythology to motivate the hero and arrange his fate, his status would indeed be reduced from hero-deity to that of a mindless picaro (as some critics claim), a buffoon-like Simplizissimus or an Eulenspiegel.<sup>1</sup>

But the dividing line between mythic hero and picaro is frequently a cloudy one, as critics of myth versus legend tell us: "In picaresque tales, in carnivals and revels, in magic rites of healing, in man's religious fears and exaltations, this phantom of the trickster haunts the mythology of all ages, sometimes in quite unmistakable form, sometimes in strangely modulated guise."<sup>2</sup> Oskar Matzerath is, of course, a trickster at times and consciously plays the Simplex role at others; but his farcical actions and satirical aspect are really of secondary importance in comparison to his purposes as a shamanistic drummer fulfilling a mission manifested at birth and prepared for throughout his childhood. Hermes, Heracles, Odysseus, Loki, and others were also picaros and tricksters of sorts, mythological heroes whose destiny required exploration of surreal realms as well as superhuman achievements within a more normal cultural context. Social absurdity and the grandeur of human existence also belong to the epics of history, and their presence here contributes in large measure to the fullness and international success of this great postwar novel; but it is nevertheless the underlying mythology of this novel that lifts the work from a possibly limited scope to a higher order of

<sup>1</sup> The most convincing proponents of this interpretation are Willy Schumann, "Wiederkehr der Schelme," pp. 467-74; Horace Gregory, "The Ancient Follies are Still in the Ascendency"; Wilfried Van der Will, *Pikaro heute*; Mable Blanch, "Variations on a Picaresque Theme"; Henri Plard, "Verteidigung der Blechtrommeln." Convincingly opposing this interpretation is the article by Hans Mayer, "Felix Krull und Oskar Matzerath-Aspekte des Romans," pp. 35-67.

<sup>2</sup> Alan McGlashan, "Daily Paper Pantheon," *Lancet*, p. 238



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significance. Although the gods may be mixtures of mortal and symbolic abstractions in this novel, knowledge of their divine presence is confirmed again and again by the symbolic pattern of their lives and by the way the hero translates his confidence in them into overt action. The protagonist lives his life responding to the gods in a calculated fashion, always careful to read their sacred messages in the conscious nature of all things. Yet surprisingly few critics have dared to pursue the subject of myth and magic in *The Tin Drum* as a main avenue to understanding. From the very beginning Oskar focuses squarely on the mythic nature of people and things in the fashion of a true mythopoeist, quickly perceiving the innate power and animism of each manifestation of existence. In every episode, as well as in the style of narration, the presence and participation of Oskar's gods-Anna and Jan Bronski, Susi Kater, Luzie Rennwand, Herbert Truczinski, Bebra, and the others-make themselves known. Most critics, however, have chosen an alternate reading of the evidence and insisted that if *The Tin Drum* is an epic at all, then it is a mock epic with the parodied hero a hunchbacked dwarf of a story that deals in empty conceits and political protestations, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. They argue further that the abundance of mythic elements is mere elaboration and unnecessary in an already too lengthy, amorphous novel.<sup>7</sup> Such arguments, it would seem, are either partial interpretations or serve the needs of subjective reaction rather than objective evaluation. Oskar's adventures in *The Tin Drum* are no more disjointed or incoherent than those in Homer's or Virgil's epics. But contrary to classical mythopoeists it is only natural that Gunter Grass, who has to some extent been affected by Alfred Doblin, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot as well as the entire apocalyptic tenor of his age, should create an earthbound hero belonging more to the deluge and chthonic cycle than to some transcendent solar theogony.

Not only in major questions but in minor conventions as well *The Tin Drum* conforms conclusively to the epic tradition. To begin with, Oskar literally states that he is the hero of his own narrative, just as Odysseus did in relating his own story at the court of Alcinous (Book 7); and then, like Milton in *Paradise Lost*, Oskar the author inaugurates the narrative proper with an invocation to the Muse followed by the traditional epic question regarding unknowable, sacred origins. With that the story begins, in medias res, at a critical point in the creation of the world, a point that becomes the central revealed mystery of a subsequent mythology. Thus, in the very first episode, the sweep of the novel transcends history and returns the reader to a sacred moment beyond time, to sacred history that can best be preserved and transmitted through myths. This is in fact part of the ritual function of art and myth: "It releases us from the flux of temporality, arresting change in the timeless, the permanent, the ever-recurrent conceived as 'sacred repetition.'" Hence the mythic is the



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polar opposite of what we mean by the historical, which stands for process, inexorable change, incessant permutation and innovation. Myth is reassuring in its stability, whereas history is that powerhouse of change which destroys custom and tradition in producing the future .... "<sup>3</sup>

Every myth takes place within a given culture, at some point in history, but then, as in a literary work such as *The Tin Drum*, myth is posited as an attempt to transcend history by shifting focus from measurable time and specific events to paradigmatic ritualized forms of a timeless order. It is precisely here, in the conjunction and pressure of mythogenesis colliding with secular reality, that the author of *The Tin Drum* most fully exercises his genius. The historical context of *The Tin Drum* is of course obvious and should not be ignored, for that is the significant moment of time which is to be transcended by sacred repetition and purpose. But our concern here is with the embracing sweep of the novel, the attempt to reconceive and experience myth as divine history and witness its triumphs and failures in relationship to profane history, to the "powerhouse of change." A last question now of whether or not one accepts the supernatural beings as real or as fancy is surely among the most important; for depending on how it is answered, the novel becomes either an amusing fantasy or an earnest series of episodes for the reader.

Was the novel not within the mythic realm, then how would one interpret Oskar's conversations with Jesus and with Satan, Oskar's miracles, his supernatural aids, his effective rituals? Are they merely to be considered parody? Burlesque? Satire? And if so, of what? Of a defeated Germany? Of national guilt? Of heroism? Of Oskar himself? Hardly. No compelling answer has yielded itself to such questions as yet. There might be some basis for the opinion that these adventures of Oskar's are all imagined, all psychological excrescences parading as reality through the mind and the pen of a madman. That might also be an observation that applies to many authors in at least a general way. As for the claim that Oskar is mad and nothing more, one may turn to the psychological-mythic defence of visions by Mann's devil in *Doctor Faustus*: "You see me; therefore I exist for you. Is it worthwhile asking if I really exist? Isn't that which acts something real? Isn't truth that which is felt and experienced?" Ultimately, then, if seen from the vantage of mythic conceptualization, all aspects of the novel (style, structure, logic, patterns of narration, visual imagery, and symbolic development) identify this work as an epic with an intractable mythology, a carefully

<sup>3</sup> Philip Rahv, *The Myth and the Powerhouse*, p. 6



"composed story telling of origins and destinies: the explanations of ... why the world is and why we do as we do, its pedagogic images of the nature and destiny of man. "<sup>4</sup>

The epic myth also deals with definitions and relationships as part of a totally anthropomorphized universe in which nothing can be discarded as insignificant. Nothing is mere delusion if it affects the visible world of man and the final measure of nature's truth. In fact, the epic myth sets nothing less than the panorama of cosmic and human creation as its uncharted territory ready to be explored and formulated by the mythopoeic faculties of men.

Study of *The Tin Drum* deals with precisely that, the question of origins and destinies in a universe that "is as it is" because it is dominated entirely by the relentless powers of the Great Earth Mother who guides life from birth to the grave and back again.

Gunter Grass mentions literally a dozen or so well-known mythic situations and characters in the novel that in turn lend identity and significance to a given situation, although admittedly, in a negative fashion at times. (Grass often prefers to point out obvious mythological overtones by denying them: compare Vittelar's denial that he is a serpent and Oskar's denial that he is Odysseus.) Moreover, Grass's habit of punning and concocting significant names provides useful etymologies that often render the nature of its possessor more lucid. In more complex situations, the author provides the reader with so profuse a configuration of mythic symbols that it becomes impossible not to recognize the original source of the event (e.g., Vittelar as the serpent of Eden). Our second and more abstract gathering of evidence, by induction and association, will centre on the author's (perhaps unconscious) use of psycho-mythic archetypes and on the even more abstract level of mythopoeic symbolizing, an art in which Grass is impressively gifted. Here two general divisions- "mythopoeic," properly referring to the creation of new mythic perception, and "mythological," implying the literary use and borrowing of known mythic forms-will be pointed out as occurring in Grass's writing. One can at times clearly observe playful, conscious, parodistic use of mythogyms in *The Tin Drum*, but more convincing is the author's creation of a private pantheon of gods and goddesses, episodes of sacrifice of demigods in Danzig and in the West, the salvation of Viktor Weluhn by the ghostly Polish cavalry.

Oskar's messianic mission, and other mythic patterns. If these observations on myth and literature, historical forms, and technical procedures seem unduly elusive or complicated, then perhaps the author himself, Gunter Grass, can help focus them more succinctly in one of his rare statements on the nature of his novel:

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<sup>4</sup> Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, p. 180.



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"*The Tin Drum* is first and foremost a realistic novel. The satire, the legend, the parable, the ghost story, in short, everything that is stupidly and simplistically stamped as surrealism nowadays, serve and belong to this realism."<sup>5</sup> Surrealism, therefore, fact and fantasy, blends into realism for Grass, just as for Ernst Cassirer who has said of mythmakers in the past: "The mythopoeic mind does not regard myth merely as a symbolic expression or representation of some independent reality."<sup>6</sup>

For Grass, even when formulating his wildest inventions, "there are no abstract denotations; every word is immediately transformed into a concrete mythical figure, a god or a daemon."<sup>7</sup> Mythic imagery and creation are therefore basic and not mere literary elaboration or decor; they are the essential perception and ontological framework for a dynamic *Weltanschauung* that unites separate experiences into a cohesive artistic totality. And whoever can read the works of Gunter Grass in this mode of experiencing reality as a form of progressive epiphany will not fail to grasp the fully unique essence of his artistry. His particular gift as an author, as his statement implies, is not in the rearranging or imitating of objects and events of an external order but rather in the dynamic re-creation and animation of being.

Thus, Grass's great contribution emerges somewhat in the manner and style of Holderlin, Joyce, Doblin, Hermann Broch, or even Rilke at times, who occasionally spoke of "making visible the being that hides within the forms." With such magic-and as a literary tour de force-*The Tin Drum* can without reservation be placed alongside the most innovative and powerful works of fiction of these other authors. *The Tin Drum* clearly belongs to the great novels of world literature; and that statement, once made, enables us now to proceed directly to the heart of the novel, to a world of supernatural beings, bizarre adventures, complex rituals, and mythic configurations.

<sup>5</sup> "Wie sind Sie auf den Blechtrommler gekommen?" *Frankfurter Neue Presse*, 14 Nov. 1959. Also in K. L. Tank, *Günter Grass*, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 2:12, and cf. Ch. 1 regarding mythic consciousness of objects ("mythisches Gegenstandsbewusstsein").

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, p. 97.



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