

# Revisiting Günter Grass

Voices from India and Germany

Vibha Surana / Meher Bhoot (eds.)

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Voices from India and Germany

Edited by Vibha Surana / Meher Bhoot

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This is what Grass's great novel said to me in its drumbeats: Go for broke. Always try and do too much. Dispense with safety nets. Take a deep breath before you begin talking. Aim for the stars. Keep grinning. Be ruthless. Argue with the world. And never forget that writing is as close as we get to keeping a hold on the thousand and one things – childhood, certainties, cities, doubts, dreams, instants, phrases, parents, loves – that go on slipping like sand, through our fingers. And one more, which I got from that other, immense work, *Dog Years*: when you've done it once, start all over again and do it better.<sup>1</sup>

Salman Rushdie

1 Rushdie, Salman: »Introduction«, in: *Grass, Günter: On Writing and Politics, 1967-1983*. Transl. by Ralph Manheim. Introduction by. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers pp. x

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Chandrika Kumar

## *The Meeting at Telgte*

A fictive History of Literature or a Tribute?

The thing that hath been tomorrow is that which shall be yesterday. Our stories of today need not have taken place in the present. This one began more than three hundred years ago. So did many other stories. Every story set in Germany goes back that far. If I am writing down what happened in Telgte, it is because a friend, who gathered his fellow writers around him in the forty-seventh year of our century, is soon to celebrate his seventieth birthday; ... (Grass 1981: 3)

This is how Günter Grass begins his novella *The Meeting at Telgte*, first published in the year 1979 to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of his teacher and friend Hans Werner Richter (1908- 1993) who had famously founded the Group 47. On the lines of this Group, Grass creates a historical fiction whereby famous literary personalities of the baroque period meet in the year 1647 on invitation of Simon Dach (1605-1659) at Telgte, a small place between Münster and Osnabrück, not only to share their literary achievements but also to propose a peaceful resolution to end the 30 Years War. Grass offers through this fiction an almost accurate account of the literature of the baroque age using authentic literary sources which amounts to retelling history, but this entire exercise is meant to commemorate the work done by the dear teacher and friend. The following essay is an attempt to analyse this story and meant not only to address the genre specific question, but also on the one hand to see how graciously Grass himself found an occasion and idea to celebrate a friend's birthday and on the other hand how distinctively Grass reconstructs history in a manner that overthrows the various categories of time. Besides, one can also witness an extraordinary blend of poetry and politics together in this fictional as well as historical reconstruction.

Exactly twenty years after his most successful novel *The Tin Drum* (1959) and barely two years after his epic novel *The Flounder* (1978) (*Der Butt* 1977) Günter Grass writes a novella *The Meeting at Telgte* (1981) (*Das Treffen in Telgte* 1979). The main motive of this novella is a message for peace, something that makes this work extremely relevant in the

age of political crisis and growing violence. However, this is not one of the most read works of Grass. He writes this novella to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of his friend and mentor, Hans Werner Richter.

This critique reviews Grass's *The Meeting in Telgte* from two perspectives: as a reflection of literary history and as a tribute. This essay is divided into four parts: in the first it showcases the multiple accomplishments of Grass as an author, and how these qualities get reflected in this work. The second part on text and context depicts *The Meeting in Telgte* as an expression of the poets' desire to meet, which Grass translates into a call for action. Subsequently, it is observed that Grass overcomes the various categories of time in this narrative. For him »unfinished present is showcased in the past« (Seeba 1981: 144f) which eventually forms the basis for the future course of action. Thirdly, with the help of the characters an attempt is made to show how much of historical reality and artistic invention go into *The Meeting at Telgte*. Lastly, it demonstrates the paradox of poetry and politics.

### 1. Günter Grass: An Author of Multiple Accomplishments

Günter Grass, 1999 Nobel laureate for literature and one of the most gifted as well as controversial writers of our time passed away on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2015 after more than six decades of creative and literary life. One of the most remarkable tributes on this occasion was paid by his friend and another literary genius of our time, Salman Rushdie who calls him »the great dancer of German literature«<sup>1</sup> (Rushdie 2015: 9). Rushdie recalls the celebration of Grass' 70<sup>th</sup> birthday when numerous authors had gathered in the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg to honour Grass. After the customary songs and speech in his praise, the stage was converted into a dance floor where Grass showed his mastery and command over several forms of dancing art such as waltz, polka, foxtrot, tango, and gavotte. He danced, says Rushdie reminiscing, as if »all the most beautiful girls of Germany were lining up to dance with him«. (Rushdie 2015: 9) But this is not the only talent of Grass that Rushdie recounts on this occasion. He admittedly says:

1 *Der große Tänzer der Literatur* by Salman Rushdie, published on 15.04.2015 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* is a German translation by Felicitas von Lovenberg. The original under the title *The Greatness of Günter Grass* was published in *The New Yorker* on 13.04.2015. Cf. <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-greatness-of-gunter-grass> [27.7.2016]

I envied him his artistic gift almost more than I admired him for his literary genius. How wonderful, at the end of a day's writing, to walk down the street and become a different sort of artist! He designed his own book covers, too: dogs, rats, toads moved from his pen onto his dust jackets. (Rushdie 2015: 9)

Only Grass could be an artist of this kind. Erich Richard Schade complements this by calling him ›doubly gifted‹ – as a poet as well as an artist – who »[...] completed at least 145 etchings during the period 1972-79, while at the same time publishing several novels, amongst them *Das Treffen in Telgte* [...]«. (Schade 1982: 200)

For Grass, as an artist and author, it is very important to deal with history and provide it a literary flavour. He does this with several of his literary works. One of the most notable examples where he uses a historical event to base his plot is his novella *The Meeting at Telgte*. Rushdie terms this trend in his Grass obituary as »dancing across history's horrors toward literature's beauty« (Rushdie 2015: 9). One can see that Grass deals with the horrors of the Thirty Years' War differently by making one of the literary geniuses of the baroque period call for a meeting which primarily aimed at coming up with a resolution to end the war peacefully. Whilst dealing with literature and history simultaneously Grass becomes a historian, though of a different kind. He does not merely go by an actual event, as such a meeting never took place, instead he believes in creating an event in history which has a parallel in his present. Creation of an event in history has a purpose which is a tryst of the personal, the literary, thus the cultural and the political nature. Ceppl-Kaufmann says that Grass uses history as a call to action:

An author is someone who writes against the elapsing time; that is sufficient for me as an explanation. You know, politics for me as a writer is an attempt to anticipate the elapsing time, to make use of it or to characterise it before it (the time) has elapsed. (Ceppl-Kaufmann 1975: 305)<sup>2</sup>

Thus history, literature and politics – all three – go hand-in-hand for Grass. In fact, political engagement is an important aspect of Grass'

2 The above text translated into English by me. »Ein Schriftsteller ist jemand, der gegen verstreichende Zeit schreibt; das reicht mir eigentlich aus als Erklärung. Wissen Sie, Politik, bei mir als Schriftsteller, ist der Versuch, demnächst verstreichende Zeit

personality. Politics for him as a writer wasn't at all a taboo. Unlike many authors who stay away from politics to focus on their writing, Grass had the capability to integrate politics with his writing. He was a political aid to the erstwhile Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt, took part in the peace movement, expressed himself vehemently on any issue that perturbed him; yet at the same time he authored a significant body of literature leading him to the Nobel Prize. His association with politics and strong views on political matters often turned him into a controversial figure. With his book *Peeling the Onion* (2007) (*Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* 2006) and the poem *What Must Be Said* (2012) he reached the pinnacle of political controversy of all time.

What becomes evident here is that he was not just ›doubly gifted‹; he was instead a versatile genius who wrote poems, plays, novels, novellas, speeches, essays, commentaries – covering almost every possible genre of literature; an artist who danced, etched hundreds of sketches; and a committed social as well as political and cultural activist. For him poetry and politics, art and activism did not exist in isolation; in fact, they complemented each other quite practically. The demise of such an author has caused a big void in the world of literature, as well as for a world which is still characterized by crisis and discrimination.

## 2. *The Meeting at Telgte*: Text and Context

It is established that the novella *The Meeting at Telgte* is a side piece of Grass' novel *The Flounder* (1977) with particular emphasis on the fourth chapter of the novel where Martin Opitz and Andreas Gryphius – two of the most prominent poets of the German baroque literature – meet each other on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1636 (Neuhaus 1992: 147). In *The Meeting at Telgte* however, which apparently takes place 11 years later, (by this time Opitz (1597-1639) is no more), one sees a galaxy of poets from across Germany coming together on the invitation of Simon Dach. Some of the poets, the ones from Nuremberg, Strasburg, Amsterdam, Hamburg and Breslau come along with their publishers. Their meeting was planned at Oesede, a place close to Osnabrück. Poets from as far as London in the west, Silesia in the east, Jutland in the north, and Regensburg in the south gathered at Oesede where timely arrangements for the meeting had been made by Simon Dach, but they were not allowed to hold their

vorwegzunehmen, sie zu nützen oder zu prägen, bevor sie verstrichen ist.«

meeting at the planned location as the Swedish war minister Erskine had already occupied it. Thus, in the very first chapter of the novella one gets to see how people with power treat poets whom the narrator also terms as »Men of mere verbal action«. (Grass 1981:3)

An alternate accommodation was suggested to the helpless poets and their host Dach by Gelnhausen (Grimmelshausen) who came from Nuremberg along with Harsdörffer, his publisher Endter and the young Sigmund Birken in the very moment when the poets were deliberating as to what they would do next. It is Gelnhausen who takes all the poets to Telgte, a small place along the river Ems between Münster and Osnabrück. Once the poets reach Telgte, they start their meeting under Dach's supervision. They read from their manuscripts and discuss the misery of their fatherland and the maladies of poetry of their times. Their ultimate aim is to come up with a resolution for peace to end the Thirty Years' War.

The twenty-three chapters of the novella take the readers through that what unfolds in the next two and a half days. Above all *The Meeting at Telgte* highlights the poets' desire to meet. Though poets have always wanted to meet their contemporaries, there aren't many who would take the initiative by sending out invitation to others. »As long as the war was going on, meetings had been more longed for than planned« (Grass 1981: 16). Besides that there are always various factions among people belonging to the same profession. Such an initiative requires a person who commands respect above all divisions.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, there was a litterateur who successfully organized a meeting of likeminded people from 1947 to 1967 and helped many young authors to embark upon a successful literary career. Incidentally, Grass himself was one of the beneficiaries of these meetings which were organized by Hans Werner Richter. This group led by Richter in post-war Germany was called Group 47 because of its year of inception. It was formed in the aftermath of the Second World War to provide a new direction to Germany and its literature which had suffered quite a bit because of the War. The Thirty Years' War was perhaps one such historical event when Germany and its literature had suffered in the same manner yet no initiative was taken on part of the poets to call for a peaceful resolution to end the war. Perhaps with this particular point in view, Grass reconstructs through his novella *The Meeting at Telgte* a document that gives expression not only to the poets'

desire to meet but also to call for action, »... if only from the sidelines - uttering a political word or two.« (Grass 1981: 17) This call for action is certainly not limited to the past. It is rather located in the present which is manifested in the very beginning of the novella whereby Grass imposes his call for action upon the narrator: »The thing that hath been tomorrow is that which shall be yesterday. Our stories of today need not have taken place in the present.« (Grass 1981: 3)

The first person auctorial narrator provides factual details on the Group 47 and its founder Hans Werner Richter as Simon Dach (1605-1659) could not have celebrated his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. Clearly, it is referring to Richter whose 70<sup>th</sup> birthday was celebrated in 1978, the year of this novella's writing. There is no other occasion for Grass to write this novella. He is dedicating it to his friend and teacher, Hans Werner Richter. Thus the call for action in the present is to express personal gratitude as well as to make a political statement which has a bearing for the future. This is evident not just in the sentence structure »the thing that hath been tomorrow is that which shall be yesterday« (Grass 1981: 3) but also in the end where the narrator laments: »But during that century no one assembled us again in Telgte or anywhere else. I know how much further meetings would have meant to us.« (Grass 1981: 132)

As a matter of fact meetings of the Group 47 had stopped taking place after 1967. Therefore Ganeshan sees in *The Meeting at Telgte* a commemoration of the end of the Group 47 (Ganeshan 1980: 51f). But the narrator here is perhaps not referring to the meeting of the Group 47 anymore. What possibly is being referred to is on the one hand the desire to meet often or regularly and on the other to keep making pacifist political statements in the future as well.

With the first line itself »The thing that hath been tomorrow is that which shall be yesterday« (Grass 1981: 3), this novella is showing as to how the three categories of time can be overcome. The present seems to be merging with the past and the future in formulations like »that which shall be yesterday« and »that hath been tomorrow«. Grammatically this may not seem correct, but here one can see a programmatic formula that Grass is offering to his readers and the message is to take an action in the present because it is at the junction between the past and the future. If the present is not cared for enough, the future will remain uncertain. At the same time, though the past cannot be changed, it can

certainly be given a new meaning in the present. Grass does that by commemorating the great initiative taken by his friend and teacher, Richter. This had perhaps inspired Grass to call for a similar meeting of poets in Lübeck in 2005. It is another matter that he could not carry it forward as successfully as Richter could for about two decades.

### 3. Real and Imaginative Narratives

*The Meeting at Telgte* is like an academic conference or a poetic conclave to which most of the German baroque poets are invited by Simon Dach. This is on the lines of the meetings of the Group 47; however what this novella offers is an overview of the German baroque literature by means of presenting some of the most important literary works by their writers. At the outset the narrator provides an introduction to all participating poets who come from far-off places to Oesede. After the initial problem of accommodation in Oesede and the subsequent transfer to Telgte, the meeting finally starts. The poets offer their condolences to those who lost their lives in the course of the Thirty Years' War. Martin Opitz (1597-1639), Friedrich Spee (1591-1635) and Paul Fleming (1609-1640) are the three prominent names which find mention here. After a break they discuss the various German dialects. Though everyone speaks in their vernacular, they are able to understand each other mostly with some difficulty here and there. It was actually for the sake of their language and literature that the poets had gathered in Telgte. They read from their manuscripts; after the reading, poets in the audience give a critical review which the reader is not allowed to defend. This was also a characteristic feature of the Group 47.

Buchner, Birken, Moscherosch, Harsdörffer and Lauremberg read theoretical passages on German language and literature from their manuscripts. Here one finds a language conflict erupting, when between the two sides, one advocates the imposition of standard German, whereas the other is clearly in favour of the linguistic diversity in German literature. Gelnhausen who is also known as Stoffel says that he cannot understand the dispute as the poem presented by Lauremberg in Low German sounds equally neat. Once again he offers a solution and says: »... they should subsist side by side and mixed, ...« (Grass 1981: 28-29).

Then Birken, Scheffler, Greflinger and Gryphius read from their texts. After the disputation when poets break for lunch and find hardly anything of their liking to eat, they express dissatisfaction over

the lack of sufficient provision and criticise Dach for his arrangements. Afterwards Dach calls Zesen, Harsdörffer, Logau and Rist to read from their texts. Soon thereafter Gelnhausen brings more provision upon which there is a feast for the poets. Later on it is found out that he had brought it with unfair means. On the final day two drafts of the resolution are presented. Once again the poets read from their manuscript. After everyone including Czepko, Hoffmannswaldau and Weckherlin, Simon Dach reads as the last person in this conclave. Following the discussion on the two drafts of the resolution Dach and Czepko prepare a fair and final draft which is signed by all the poets present. At the end Libuschka's tavern catches fire. The poets leave it in a hustle and forget to take along the final draft of their resolution. The entire tavern burns down to ashes and so does the draft of the resolution. All leave for their destination dissatisfied. The first person auctorial narrator laments that no one assembled the poets again for such a meeting. He concludes on a teasing note on his own ignorance about the cause of the fire: »But who set the Bridge Tavern on fire I don't know, I don't know ...« (Grass 1981: 132). Though the entire plot of *The Meeting at Telgte* is a product of Grass' imagination, most of the characters here, particularly the poets and their publishers are real and existed in the history of German baroque literature. Only the three maids – Marthe, Marie and Elsabe – of Libuschka's tavern are invented. The hostess, Libuschka who is at times called Courage by the narrator, and Gelnhausen (Grimmelshausen) share a distinct relationship in German literary history. Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, born in 1621 at Gelnhausen is a real figure in German literary history. He initially served the Bishop of Strasburg and later pursued his wish to write, subsequently becoming a litterateur who wrote the famous baroque novel *Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus* and *Die Ertzbetrügerin und Landstörtzerin Courasche*. Thus Courage or Libuschka is a literary character created by Grimmelshausen. Their relation is validated in the novella when the hostess Libuschka is introduced to Dach, Rist and Harsdörffer by Gelnhausen in the second chapter of the novella:

Taking aside the landlady, with whom he was evidently acquainted, he exchanged whispers with her and then introduced her to Dach, Rist, Harsdörffer as Libuschka, a friend of long years' standing. (Grass 1981: 10)



Grass gives Courage a new name, Libuschka and blends her character as the hostess. He uses Courage or Libuschka to create a framework to narrate the history of German baroque literature. It is obviously because of her that Gelnhausen brings all the poets from Oesede to Telgte. She is so well educated that she can entertain the poets in Italian and Latin as well. When Libuschka entertains the poets in her tavern by narrating several anecdotes about her past, the attributes ›Ertzbetrügerin‹ (notorious crook) and ›Landstörtzerin‹ (vagabond) ascribed to her by Grimmelshausen, become quite evident.

The second most striking feature in terms of the representation of the real in this novella is the fact that poets participating in the meeting read from the work they have actually written and the titles of these works do not carry any anomaly. Excerpts read by the poets from their works are symptomatic of the way in which books on literary history are written. Thus *The Meeting at Telgte* which relies intensely on historical facts amounts to a unique literary history of the German baroque age. There are several invented elements, not just the three maids but also the idea of this narration is a product of Grass' artistic and historic imagination, which makes it a work of fiction. Since such a meeting did not take place in 1647 *The Meeting at Telgte* can be called a fictional history of German baroque literature.

Different interpretations of *The Meeting at Telgte* establish different figures as the most prominent figures. The four women according to Anderson are the most influential figures, whereas Schade finds Grimmelshausen and the thistle to be most significant. However, in my opinion it is Simon Dach who is the central figure. It is he, around whom, the entire narration takes place. He is the one to decide as to whom, the entire narration takes place. He is the one to decide as to who would participate in the meeting. There are several views as to who should be invited and who not, »[...] but Dach's persistence and political firmness had proved decisive«. (Grass: 1981: 17) This is once again a prerogative that the founder of Group 47 exercised.

Besides, Dach shows extraordinary convincing capacity and does not let an alternate meeting take place. There are suggestions to hold the meeting in a relatively less disturbed area, such as Lissa (Poland) or Gehege (Switzerland), but it is Dach who initially decides the venue of the meeting. This is another similarity between Dach and Richter.

Simon Dach commands respect amongst all the poets. He is the one to suggest the idea of tolerance among Catholic and Protestant poets at

a time when wars based on religion have torn Europe. He is the one to help several poets overcome their differences with others. Moreover, Dach puts the cause before himself. He in his right as a poet could have started the meeting with his own reading, but he chooses to be the last person to read his poetry. The narrator says: »... for he did not wish to open the meeting with his own production. Nor did he allow any further introductory speeches« (Grass 1981: 19). So he keeps the job of the compère with himself; only at the end when Dach himself has to read from his poetry he requests the elderly Weckherlin to chair the reading.

The most important characteristic feature of the host of any event is to be ready to take criticism if something goes wrong with the arrangements. Dach shows this capacity when on the second day of the meeting the poets find the provisions wanting. Pious Gerhardt tells Dach: »Dach, who had done the inviting, should have made sure such strict necessities as bacon and beans were available; ...« (Grass 1981: 64). To this Dach tells the guests that they can rebuke him, but they should not accuse his sponsor who has supported him in this endeavour. Defending the facilitator on part of Dach is fair enough, but his readiness to take criticism is notable.

As the plot of the novella retells the history of German baroque literature almost accurately while foregrounding the significant contribution made by the Group 47, one sees both the historian and the artist in Grass pay a poetic tribute to his friend and mentor, Richter.

#### 4. The Paradox of Poetry and Politics

Referring to poets as »men of mere verbal action« (Grass 1981: 3) Grass clearly shows the paradox of poetry and politics in his novella. One understands that the main point in the plot situated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Germany torn by the Thirty Years' War is to prepare a document which calls upon the people in power to reinstate peace. Subhoranjan Dasgupta sees in it the »poets pray for peace« (Dasgupta 2002: 37). But what we witness at the end is the burning of the prepared document into ashes. Thus the people in power never get to read what the poets wanted them to read and subsequently consider. The annihilation of this document has been included perhaps intentionally by Grass to show what Schade calls the »problematic relationship of poets to politicians.« (Schade 1982: 205)

But Grass shows that poets have a special kind of motivation or reasoning to write poetry. They have a compassionate feeling for their country. They already know »when the fatherland was laid low, poetry could hardly be expected to flower« (Grass 1981: 62). Yet they cannot help but take up the matter of their Fatherland. Dach, for example, says in his introductory speech about Germany during the Thirty Years' War: »Where, O Germany, shall I leave you? For well nigh thirty years, by murder and rapine, Thou hast destroyed thyself, the guilt is thine ...« (Grass 1981: 18). This state of the country is largely a result of the action and decision made by the people in politics, yet the poets feel the need or at least try to salvage the situation by discussing and proposing the future course of action. Poets want to save and unite their country with the help of their poetry. If they pursue this ambition they also know for sure: »And where the princes had disgraced themselves, poets had earned respect. They, not the powerful, were assured of immortality« (Grass 1981: 17). This argument is illustrated in a little more elaborate manner towards the end of the novella in chapter 20:

Though at present they had no power and little glory, since the present was dominated by war and land grabbing, religious oppression and short-termed greed, they aspired with the help of poetry to gain future power and secure eternal glory... (Grass 1981: 120)

This way Grass adds value to the moral responsibility poets share and carry in their temporal and local confines. This ethical proposition advocated by Grass carried a lot of meaning not just for his time; it continues to be meaningful for our present as well as for the future. Here again it's evident as to how Grass overcomes the three categories of time successfully by suggesting things that have timeless and universal validity. The paradox of politics and poetry tells us politics is confined to the present and its circumstances. However, poetry does not know these boundaries.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up it can be said that through *The Meeting at Telgte* Grass is spreading a message for peace. This novella is perhaps also a document which appeals for balance in the paradox of politics and poetry. Grass

is also in a way liberating poetry from politics. The work integrates not only history, politics, and literature, but also bridges the past and future with the help of the present; thereby it overcomes the difference of the three categories of time. Through the expression of the poets' wish to meet again and again it encourages us to take a call for action.

The content and narrative style in *The Meeting at Telgte* elevates this tribute of Grass to Hans Werner Richter to a well researched creative history of the German baroque literature. Grass, the master of all genres, thus produces a fictitious, poetic and historical polylog: a polylog not just because it has both verbal and visual media (etching of the hand surrounded by thistle and holding a feather to write) present, but also because Grass brings over twenty-five baroque poets together at one place and makes them discuss over an issue which concerns them and us collectively.

## NOTES

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