

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Guenter Grass (1927-

### *Introduction*

Guenter Grass was born in Danzig (Gdansk), in a culturally complex environment which was both German and Polish, and which lay at the heart of the fighting between Russians and Germans in the Second World War. His mother owned a grocery store in Danzig, and proved the main support of the family, which though not well off managed to send Guenter to a fine prep school, the *Conradinum*, where he received a rigorous education. His relation with his father was lacking in the intimacy the young man wanted, and at age fourteen Guenter enlisted in a submarine division of the German army. (He was caught up in war fever, and wanted to participate in his nation's upcoming conquests in the East.) Moving on from that basic military commitment, he soon joined the 10<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division of the Waffen SS, Hitler's elite Storm Troopers. It was this move which proved the most controversial of his life, and which serves as the key preoccupation of our reading for this week, a preoccupation the greater for the long commitment of Grass, after the war, to anti-war causes, and his prominence as a supporter of demilitarized Germany.

For a half year Grass served with the Panzer Division, until he was taken prisoner by the Americans, and held in a prison camp awaiting repatriation into a Germany which, because the old homelands of Danzig were now Russian occupied, had to repatriate him to West, Berlin. Never far from his notebooks and sketch pads, whether in childhood or war or post-war time, Grass entered heartily into the cultural life of liberated West Berlin. He wrote voluminously—making himself best known in the West for *The Tin Drum* (1959) and, later, *Cat and Mouse* and *Dog Years*. He was also active and influential as a sculptor, graphic artist, and poet. From 1983-86 Grass was President of the Berlin Academy of the Arts. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1999.

While much of Grass' work in fiction is now considered part of the magic realism school—fantasy, abrupt shifts in narrative, self-conscious play with the reader, exoticism at will; as in the work of Garcia Marquez or Julio Cortazar in South America—the work we are reading belongs with autobiography in the formal sense—though with the sharp personal tweak given it by Grass. You will note, for starters, that Grass the narrator moves in and out of his main character, himself, at one time speaking in that person's voice, at another speaking 'about' that narrator in the third person. The play between these perspectives keeps the self-account supple, giving Grass himself ample room to roam over the cultural landscape of pre and post war Germany, and to introduce us artfully to his own ideas about war, armaments, and art. Grass the fiction writer is all over this commentary on his own times, as you will note by the rhetorical device by which Grass raises the question whether what he is telling is true, or is just a game played by Fickle Dame Memory. The self he targets is lodged in a 'real world,' as embeddedly as Bismarck's self is lodged in his diplomatic/political world, but Grass's self performs, in his word environment, like a character in fiction.

### *Readings*

Guenter Grass, *Peeling the Onion* (trans. Michael Heim). (Orlando, 2007).

### *Questions:*

Grass' book acquired much notoriety for its revelation of his enrollment with the Waffen SS, Hitler's elite corps, especially in view of Grass' later renunciation of anything to do with the Nazi war machine. Does Grass convincingly clear himself of his 'earlier mistakes'? Is he remorseful?

What role does Grass's family play in his coming into himself? How does he present himself in relation to that family, and do you feel confident that he is trying to portray the family as they were? Or does the fictional urge inflect his portrayal of that family?

What kind of childhood did Grass have? Into what kinds of corners did he retreat, in order to be himself? How does he portray this intimacy of youth in himself?

Has your view of what autobiography is changed as a result of working through this syllabus? Does the term autobiography—a writing about oneself—prevail over the notion of 'life writing'? Can you see certain descriptive advantages to 'life writing'?

Do the autobiographies of Grass, Frisch, and Wolf seem to you to have a lot in common? Do they all reflect a post WW2 mood, or perhaps a late 20<sup>th</sup> century mood, which holds them together?

How has war been treated in the self-describing efforts of Grimmelshausen, Goethe (in *Poetry and Truth*), Bismarck, Grass? Does war provide a thematic in terms of which the autobiographer can self define?

Does the autobiographer often trace the stages of his/her life—Moritz, Wagner, Nietzsche, Grass—and if so how do these writers describe the different stages their life has gone through? Does the narrator change as the figure he/she is describing goes through different life stages?