VERGANGENHEITSBEWÄLTIGUNG
AND THE DANZIG TRILOGY

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With the end of the Second World War in 1945, Germany was forced to examine and come to terms with its National Socialist era. It was a particularly difficult task. Many Germans, even those who had suspected the National Socialist crimes, were shocked by the true barbarity of the Nazi regime. Günter Grass, who spent 1945 in an American POW camp listening to the Nuremberg Trials, was one of those Germans. How could the Holocaust have arisen from the land of poets and philosophers?

German authors began to seek the answer to this question immediately following the end of WWII, and this pursuit naturally led to several different genres of German post-war literature. Some authors adopted the style of Kahlschlag (clear cutting), in which precise use of language would free German from the propaganda-laden connotations of Goebbels’s National Socialist Germany. Others spoke of a Stunde Null (Zero Hour), a new beginning without reflection upon the past. These styles are easily recognizable in the works of early post-war authors like Alfred Andersch, Günter Eich, and Wolfgang Borchert. However, it would take ten years before German authors adopted the style of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, an analysis and overcoming of Germany’s past.¹

In 1961 Walter Jens wrote that only works written after 1952 should be considered part of the genre of German post-war literature (cited in Cunliffe 3). Without a distanced analysis of the Second World War an author would be unable to produce a true work of art. This claim is the logical, although more optimistic, successor to Theodor Adorno’s famous quote (1951): “After Auschwitz, to write poetry is barbaric” (Adorno 30 Transl. mine.). Günter Grass proved with his Danzig Trilogy — The Tin Drum (1959), Cat and Mouse (1961), and Dog Years (1963)— that authors’ works could overcome Nazism. In contrast to earlier post-war authors, Grass advocated an exact and honest treatment of Germany’s National Socialist past.² His books formed a strong criticism of the forgetfulness of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG or West Germany). Grass said: “It
had to do with the acceptance or denial of truth in a country which, defeated and divided, was burdened with the guilt of genocide and nevertheless, or perhaps consequently, was prepared to suppress, to render without context, everything which would raise the specter of the past and prevent the escape into the future” (cited in Malchow and Shafi 58 Transl. mine). In defiance of this German forgetfulness, Grass created barbaric, absurd, and grotesque scenes in order to integrate the crimes of National Socialism into his works.

The Danzig Trilogy constitutes an attempt at a socio-political and individual *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Grass’ primary concern was to compel the discussion of National Socialist crimes in German post-war society. The Danzig Trilogy was remarkably successful at facilitating this socio-political *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, with the three novels selling millions of copies and sparking a spirited debate in German society. However, Grass’ novels also attempted to introduce an individual *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. After WWII, most Germans differentiated between the fanatical National Socialist core (i.e., Hitler, Goering, Goebbels, and Himmler) and the larger German populace. Grass rejects this attempt to distinguish between “guilty” and “innocent” Germans. He not only criticizes a populace which overlooked or condoned German crimes, but suggests that the dual traits of guilt and innocence/suffering/victimization are bound together in human nature. Indeed, Grass suggests that the protagonists of the three novels—Oskar Matzerath, Heini Pilenz, and Walter Matern—suffer precisely because of their unwillingness to admit their own guilt. Individual *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* thus not only requires admittance of one’s own role in socio-political crimes, but also the deeper recognition of man’s innate capacity for evil.

While it is not possible to fully examine the Danzig Trilogy in this short space, this article will nevertheless attempt to examine the main themes of each novel with respect to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Grass’s absurd and grotesque imagery alludes to the cult of National Socialism and the inhumanity of the Nazi era. In *The Tin Drum*, Oskar Matzerath is a perverted messiah who exposes societal immorality in some instances while taking the role of a dwarf Jesus in others. Oskar is both a prophet and a tempter. Mahlke, the protagonist in *Cat and Mouse*, is conversely a pious Catholic whose enlistment in the Germany Army symbolizes the Church’s ineffective resistance of National Socialism. *Dog Years* changes the Trilogy’s emphasis to the victims of Nazism. Both Eddi Amsel, a half-Jewish boy, and Jenny Brunies, a Roma orphan, suffer under the racism of the Nazi era. Together, the three novels constitute three different approaches to the theme of National Socialism and World War II.

In so far as each narrator in the Danzig Trilogy is consumed by their past, the Trilogy can be understood as a clear attempt at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. At the end of *The Tin Drum* Oskar Matzerath reflects upon his sins and the National Socialist perversion of the state. *Cat and Mouse* begins with an allusion to this perversion, as Heini Pilenz recalls how he once set a kitten—
claws out—upon Mahlke’s neck. Mahlke, who disappears after the war, becomes symbolic of victimhood and personal responsibility. Finally, *Dog Years*, whose three narrators reflect upon their lives in Danzig-Langfuhr, alludes to the effect that National Socialist persecutions had on minorities.

*The Tin Drum (1959)*

*The Tin Drum*, which appeared in 1959, not only began the Danzig Trilogy but Günter Grass’s literary career. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are noticeable parallels between the novel and Grass’ biography. Like Oskar, Grass was born in Danzig-Langfuhr to the community grocer. During the 1930s he became a member of the Hitler Youth and was later drafted into the Waffen SS. After his release from an American POW camp, Grass moved—like Oskar—to Düsseldorf, where he initially supported himself as a trader on the black market, a stonemason, and a sculptor. Grass also performed as a drummer in a jazz band (“Günter Grass”). Despite similarities to Grass’ life, *The Tin Drum* is not an autobiographical work. Rather, it is influenced by his personal experiences under the Nazi regime.

*The Tin Drum*’s retrospective character is apparent from the novel’s first page. Oskar Matzerath, the book’s narrator, claims: “I start long before me; for no one should describe his own life who cannot summon the patience to consider at least half of his grandparents’ before turning to his own existence” (12 Translation mine). The novel’s narrative, which spans several generations, alludes to the importance of one’s predecessors. Although Oskar, with only a few exceptions, proceeds linearly, his story repeatedly returns to descriptions of his family.

*Vergangenheitsbewältigung* does not indicate a biographical work, but rather an understanding of the individual past and the societal past. Oskar fulfills this role. Particularly during his narrative after World War II, Oskar tells not only his story but that of the entire German state. With themes of guilt, innocence, petite bourgeoisie life, violence, and music, Oskar paints the rise of National Socialism. Indeed, in so far as these themes intersect in Oskar’s own person, Oskar can be understood to symbolize German society before and after the National Socialist regime.

The question of guilt is inseparable from the larger theme of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. One of the most difficult and important questions of German post-war society was that of German guilt as opposed to National Socialist guilt. Was only Hitler guilty? Or the voluntary National Socialists? Or the entire German people? In *The Tin Drum*, Grass created a narrator who, despite (or perhaps as a result of) his childlike appearance, recognized the guilt of the entire
German people. Nevertheless, Oskar is a “patient in a sanitarium,” a fact which he admits in his very first sentence (9). As the reader continuously confronts the absurdity of Oskar’s narrative, he must remind himself that Oskar has been institutionalized. Oskar cannot always be trusted, an insight that becomes ever more apparent during the course of the book. Grass uses Oskar’s unreliability to create a larger symbolic understanding of his story. The narrative, with its corrections and admissions of half-truths, mirrors that of a German post-war society which minimized or dismissed its connection to National Socialism. Like German society, Oskar had to force himself—and occasionally was forced by his attendant Bruno—to admit the truth. Oskar’s narrative is namely as unreliable as that of those Germans who suddenly became members of the inner resistance after the war.

Despite his presence during several immoral acts, Oskar is usually the unnoticed observer. Oskar spends his entire childhood as the silent partner to his mother Agnes’s incestuous affair with her Polish cousin Jan. Agnes’s German husband Alfred completes the love triangle and pretends to know nothing of his wife’s affair. Only the Jewish toy merchant Sigismund Markus, who watches Oskar during Agnes and Jan’s weekly meetings, knows everything. With remarkable foresight, he begs Agnes to end her affair and settle upon her German husband so as to protect herself during the coming war. Agnes pays Sigismund Markus no attention, but when she became pregnant with Jan’s child in 1934, she becomes distraught, choosing to end both her life and that of her unborn child. In one of the most grotesque chapters in the novel, Oskar describes how his mother incessantly eats fish, eel, and sardines until she dies of fish poisoning. Her pregnancy drove her to suicide, responsibility for which Oskar later took upon himself. “The Gnome drummed her into the grave. Because of Oskar she no longer wanted to live; he killed her!” (219). Oskar exaggerated. Agnes, a Kashubian woman, was driven to suicide by her Polish and German lovers. This foreshadowing alludes to the coming war between Germany and Poland, a war in which Danzig stood in the middle (Brodsky and Shafi 54).

Oskar’s role in his second cousin Jan’s death is much clearer. On September 9, 1939, Oskar travels to Jan’s workplace, the Polish post office, where he hopes that the caretaker can repair his damaged tin drum. On his way he meets Jan, who had abandoned the post office’s defence against the Germans to his colleagues. Forced to accompany Oskar back to the post office, Jan becomes embroiled in the opening battle of World War II. Particularly interesting is how Oskar, who by 1939 is 15-years old, exhibits a childlike yearning for a working drum. This endangers both Jan and the caretaker Kobyella, but Oskar’s mania forms a stark contrast to Jan’s cowardice. Grass wanted neither the Germans, symbolized by Oskar’s manic search for the tin drum, nor the Poles, symbolized by Jan’s cowardice in the face of attack, to be understood as heroes. Oskar first describes a completely innocent separation from his cousin Jan after the German capture of the Polish post office but later says that he would have to “stay close to the truth” (318). He admits that “[he] and Jan had barely left the letter room before ... [he] placed himself between
two fatherly looking national guardsmen ... and pointed to Jan, his father, with accusatory gestures which made the innocent into the guilty [one] who had brought an innocent child into the Polish post office” (318). Oskar’s guilt in Jan’s betrayal is foremost an individual guilt—his opportunism mirrors that of those Germans who used Nazi racial laws to enrich themselves or settle grudges against their neighbors. However, Oskar’s accusation of his Polish cousin/father symbolizes the German state’s attempt to attribute the first shots of WWII to Poland. By admitting the underlying falsehoods of these accusations, Oskar—as a symbol for the German people—attempts both a personal and socio-political Vergangenheitsbewältigung.

Six years later, Oskar is responsible for the death of his other putative father, Alfred Matzerath. After a six year German occupation, the Matzerath family hides in its cellar and waits for the arriving Russian army. Only as the family hears the Russians descending the basement stairs does Alfred remember the Nazi party pin on his collar. He lets it fall to the ground, but Oskar gives it back to him immediately. Panicking, Matzerath sees no alternative but to swallow the party pin. It sticks in his throat, though, and the choking grocer is shot by an entering Russian soldier. Only later does Oskar admit his role in Alfred’s death. “It wasn’t quite true that the needle of the party pin was already exposed as I picked the treat [party pin] up from the concrete. The needle was opened only after I picked it up” (531-32).

Oskar’s patricide is often evinced as part of an argument for his ultimate immorality. However, Oskar’s betrayal is also interesting with respect to Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Oskar is, above all, an opportunist who betrays his fathers without consideration for their nationalities. As the National Socialists gained power, Oskar portrayed himself as a hostage before the German national guardsmen and betrayed his cousin/father Jan. Only six years later, Oskar betrays Alfred, a Nazi party member, to the advancing Russians. The parallels to the opportunistic betrayal of German Jews by their friends and neighbors are unmistakable.

Oskar’s glass shattering voice, betrayals, and blasphemous desires contrast his childlike appearance. Grass stands the entire concept of childlike innocence on its head by asking if it is even possible during the Nazi era. The oft-quoted sentence—“I belonged to the clairvoyant infants, whose mental development was completed at birth and thereafter had only to express itself”—points to an early omniscience with its accompanying responsibilities (52). Oskar’s clairvoyance imparted special responsibilities, since as a clairvoyant he had the ability to foresee the consequences of the National Socialist regime. One the one hand, Oskar symbolizes the Weimar Republic, which overlooked or minimized the danger of Hitler and the National Socialists despite clear warning signs in the form of the SA, the 1923 Munich Putsch, and Mein Kampf. On the other hand, Oskar symbolizes German individuals who supported the National Socialists despite (or as a result of) their racist and violent ideology. Oskar’s childlike innocence belies his innate capacity for evil. As the priest asked during his baptism, “Do you reject Satan? And all his
works? And all his pageantry?” Oskar’s godfather Jan Bronski agreed before Oskar could shake his head in disagreement (174). Oskar appeared awakened by Satanic influences and asked Satan as they left the church: “Were you able to endure everything?” Satan responded: “Did you see the church windows, Oskar? Everything is glass, everything is glass!” (174). By contrasting Oskar’s clairvoyance (i.e., a moral lens) with his decision for Satan, symbolizing power and wealth, Grass alludes to German society’s decision for the Nazi Party despite the accompanying consequences.

Grass uses the blasphemous discussion between Oskar and Satan during the baptism to satirize the youth cult of the National Socialists. Hitler, the young single Führer, and the Hitler Youth symbolized a vital, powerful, and growing Reich. Oskar symbolizes the true National Socialism. “Oskar may be a freak, but the world in which he lives is freakish. In other words, he represents an entire society which has become freakish” (Brockmann and Shafi 202). Grass contrasts Oskar—the small, disabled, permanent three year old—with the National Socialists who compared themselves to the vital and powerful youth. Like Oskar, who despite his maturity continued to play the part of the three year old, National Socialism was a perverted and grotesque movement. When Oskar shatters glass with his voice, acts as an accessory to theft, and leads the Stäuber youth gang, he contradicts society’s conception of the innocent childhood. Grass uses the contrast between Oskar’s intellectual maturity/clairvoyance and his childlike appearance to reject the concept of the innocent childhood.

Oskar’s childlike appearance not only symbolizes the Nazi era, but a grotesque crippled FRG society which had prematurely ceased denazification (Brockmann and Shafi 208). Grass belonged to a society which attempted to classify former Nazis using black and white criteria when it made the attempt at all. The FRG recognized only a small, fanatical National Socialist core, which had misled or coerced the rest of German society. Others claimed to have been part of Germany’s inner emigration. How else could such barbarity have occurred in the country of “poets and thinkers”? Grass rejects this myth. Most of his characters, like the Matzeraths, belong to the petite bourgeoisie and were neither misled nor coerced. Alfred Matzerath entered the party in 1934, hung a picture of Hitler on his wall, and increasingly reprimanded his Polish relatives. Others, like the grocer Albrecht Greff and the alcoholic trumpeter Meyn, became party members as well. Even when the men explained their party membership in terms of friendship and brotherhood, they were well aware of Nazism’s larger goals. When Maria calls Alfred a “premature ejaculator,” he says that she could have easily “caught herself a foreign worker, the Frenchman who brings the beer” (376). With his insult, Matzerath indicates an awareness of the exploitation of foreign workers. Such instances lead Oskar to laugh at the Germans who claim to have been part of the inner emigration. “One speaks of the spirit of resistance, of the resistance groups. One is even supposed to have been able to internalize their emigration, which one calls: inner emigration. Completely ignorant of the Bible thumping, noble men fined by the
anti-aircraft defense during the war for improperly blacking out their bedroom windows and who now call themselves resistance fighters” (157).

While Grass’s satirization of the petite bourgeoisie is not readily apparent, his thematic use of music—particularly with Oskar’s tin drum—is more recognizable. Oskar is a drummer, and when Oskar is without his drum he loses part of himself.\textsuperscript{10} Oskar’s drum imparts special abilities. He becomes omniscient and is able to conjure the missing aspects of his story with the help of his drum. Like the \textit{Wunderbille} (miracle glasses) from Brauxel & Co. in \textit{Dog Years}, Oskar’s drum acts as a mirror into the German past. It is precisely this ability which brings Oskar fame and fortune. First in the bar \textit{Onion Cellar} and later on stage, Oskar enables a return into the past. As such, Oskar’s drum becomes a physical instrument of \textit{Vergangenheitsbewältigung}.

Grass uses music to draw a distinction between National Socialist culture and German culture. As early as 1934, Oskar draws spectators away from the National Socialist stage by playing a waltz on his drum. The typically German, refined waltz is to be understood as the antithesis of National Socialist culture. The trumpeter Meyn provides an additional contrast. As a drunkard, Meyn plays beautifully. As a sober party member, however, his once exceptional playing becomes merely average. After the war, Oskar writes: “There was once a musician who was named Meyn, and if he has not passed away, he still lives and plays trumpet beautifully” (264). Despite National Socialism’s claims on German art and music, Grass exposes its incompatibility with true beauty. In the 1979 film adaption of \textit{The Tin Drum} by Volker Schlöndorff (with Grass as an adviser), Oskar’s drumming and singing in the service of the National Socialists are dark, violent, and dissonant.

\textit{The Tin Drum} also alludes to the violence of National Socialism. Although the trumpeter Meyn “performed with considerable bravery during the night from November 9th to 10th, which one later called the Night of Broken Glass,” he is forced out of the SA for killing his four kittens.\textsuperscript{11} The juxtaposition of the SA’s response to Meyn’s brutality—praising violence toward the Jews and condemning animal cruelty—is one of the most absurd aspects of the entire novel. Without explicitly referencing the Holocaust, Grass alludes to the grotesque valuation of Jewish life. This passage reminds the reader of the ever present and perverted violence of the National Socialist era, a time in which Jews were worth less than animals. Grass shows how these perverted values affected the entire German society. As a young boy, neighborhood children parallel the actions of the SA men, cooking a piss soup and forcibly feeding it to Oskar.

National Socialist violence and German complicity is best expressed in Grass’ powerful description of \textit{Kristallnacht}, or the Night of Broken Glass. Oskar, whose Jewish toy merchant Sigismund Markus kills himself during the night, accompanies his father Alfred into the city center and observes the SA men taking pleasure in their destruction. Only Oskar seems to recognize
the true implications of Kristallnacht. “An entire gullible people believed in Father Christmas. But Father Christmas was really the Gas Man. I believe that it smells of nuts and almonds. But in truth it smelled of gas” (244). This passage is particularly grotesque. Without explicitly mentioning the Holocaust, Grass reminds his readers of the camps’ most common execution method. By connecting almonds—a favorite Christmas treat—to the death camps, Grass’s reader smells the execution as well as visualizing it. How can one eat roasted almonds again without thinking of the victims of National Socialism? Grass also has strong criticism for a German society which had believed in “Father Christmas.” Germany desired power so strongly that it had placed its fortune in the hands of a barbaric, perverted Führer.

Cat and Mouse (1961)

While Cat and Mouse was published in 1961 as the second book in the Danzig Trilogy – between The Tin Drum and Dog Years – Grass originally envisioned it as part of the much longer Dog Years (Reddick xi). However, the story of Joachim Mahlke, narrated by Heinrich Pilenz, was too multifaceted to merely serve as a secondary storyline. Cat and Mouse is characterized by themes of responsibility, sexuality, religion, and militarism which force the reader to confront Germany’s National Socialist past.

Cat and Mouse begins with an unexpected event in the style of the classic German Novelle. Pilenz writes: “….and one time, when Mahlke was already able to swim…” (5). As he completes his tale, it becomes clear that, like The Tin Drum, Cat and Mouse is concerned with Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Pilenz continues: “in any event, it [the cat] jumped onto Mahlke’s throat; or one of us grabbed the cat and placed it upon Mahlke’s neck; or I … seized the cat and showed it Mahlke’s mouse” (6). Like Oskar, Pilenz admits his guilt only after equivocation. Along with many other Germans, he had set the cat (symbolizing the National Socialist state) upon his friend’s mouse (symbolizing the victim). At the time, Pilenz cared little that Mahlke suffered “only insignificant scratches” (6). Only later does Pilenz develop feelings of guilt and responsibility which drive him to write. “I, who showed your mouse to one and every cat, must now write” (6).

Responsibility is a multifaceted theme in Cat and Mouse. Pilenz, whose search for his friend Mahlke continues unabated after 1959, constantly returns to the summer day of the Cat and Mouse. That day symbolizes Pilenz’s first act of betrayal, a fact that he admits only with great difficulty. Pilenz also bears responsibility for failing to help his friend Mahlke after his desertion from the German military. Mahlke sought refuge with his friend—“I [Pilenz], however, wanted nothing to do with it” (162). Instead, Pilenz proposed that Mahlke hide in the minesweeper boat the boys had explored as youths and only reluctantly picked up supplies from Mahlke’s home.
Grass also suggests that Pilenz hid the can opener Mahlke would have needed to open his supplies underground, thus making him Mahlke's murderer. As Pilenz addresses his own guilt many years later, he repeatedly comes across the question that many other Germans faced in the process of their own Vergangenheitsbewältigung. To what extent does cowardice—an unwillingness to act morally in opposition to an immoral state—impart guilt? Grass' answer is made definitively clear in his several descriptions of Pilenz's guilty conscience.

The perversion of Mahlke's religious faith also speaks to the lack of moral resistance to the National Socialist state. Mahlke, a pious Catholic, wears a Maria amulet around his neck and faithfully attends church. It is thus remarkable that Mahlke becomes a reliable German soldier despite his faith and earlier resistance. Perversely, Pilenz argues that Mahlke's sense of military duty was inspired by longing for the German Army's highest honor—the Iron Cross. As a student, Mahlke stole the Iron Cross of a visiting soldier, and since that moment he yearned for one of his own. As a soldier, Mahlke earned an Iron Cross, but his heroics were prompted by particularly blasphemous courage. Mahlke claimed that the Virgin Mary guided his shells toward the enemy tanks, instantly evoking an image of the German soldier penetrating the Virgin Mary. Ruhleder interprets Mahlke's story as the description of a perverse sexual union, writing: “He [Grass] casts doubt on Mahlke's calling and reveals the hero's sexual desire for the Virgin” (606).

Ruhleder alludes to the messianic descriptions of Mahlke in *Cat and Mouse*. Pilenz narrates in the beginning “that they threw [Mahlke] out of the Jungvolk and placed him in the Hitler Youth because he neglected to perform his duty on Several Sunday mornings and lead his troop – Mahlke was a Jungvolk leader – into the Jäschkentaler forest” (31). This was met with widespread amazement among Mahlke's classmates. Together with his piousness, such scenes lend him the qualities of a messianic or prophetic savior (Ruhleder). Mahlke's classmates recognized these traits in him. One day they drew a sketch of him on the chalkboard “and beyond his head and sufferer's face [was] a halo: the savior Mahlke was perfect and his image did not disappoint (46). Ruhleder claims: “Mahlke's is an abortive attempt at becoming the Saviour by having the narrator sponge his countenance off the blackboard” (604). His military enlistment and later resistance thus becomes a vital part of the Novelle's plot.

The reader is led to understand that Mahlke's religious faith is subsumed and later replaced by his faith in the German state. It is his absurd longing for the Iron Cross that leads him to enlist in the German military, and Mahlke's messianic promise goes unfulfilled so that he might become a brave German soldier. National Socialism subsumed religious faith, as Mahlke chooses earthly fame over heavenly reward. Similarly, Grass describes a complicit church. *Cat and Mouse* depicts churches which served National Socialism rather than God, churches which turned away refugees and helped hide former Nazis. Grass thus forces churches to begin their
own Vergangenheitsbewältigung and ask how they could support the National Socialist state despite its atrocities.\textsuperscript{13}

Mahlke left the military when it became clear that he would not be able to speak at his Gymnasium. He had been expelled following his theft and no honor, not even the Iron Cross, could change the headmaster’s decision. Mahlke told Pilenz: “I’ve done my part, right? ...Not that I’m afraid, simply had enough” (161). With Mahlke, Grass rejects the National Socialism conception of youth, which idealized young men as brave and bellicose. Even if he were neither a hero of the resistance nor a messiah, he did not belong to those who marched to their end on the front.

Mahlke’s refuge in the sunken minesweeper thus draws parallels to the inner emigration of the Nazi era. He removed himself from the era’s barbarity by choosing good over evil. While not completely innocent, Mahlke stands in contrast to those Germans who suddenly discovered the concept of inner emigration in Summer 1945. In light of Germany’s defeat and massive war guilt, Mahlke’s desertion appears particularly prescient. Mahlke’s disappearance and Pilenz’s search for his old friend allude to the same concern. When Grass wrote \textit{Cat and Mouse}, he observed a grotesque, guilty German society which rejected a close analysis of its past. Like his narrator Pilenz, Grass used the written word to conjure the specter of the past in order to confront and overcome it.

\textit{Dog Years (1963)}

The epic \textit{Dog Years}, which was published in 1963, is the logical conclusion to \textit{The Tin Drum} and \textit{Cat and Mouse}. Characters from the earlier books occasionally appear, such as Tulla Pokriefke, Oskar Matzerath, Alfred Matzerath, Albrecht Greff, and Oswald Brunies.\textsuperscript{14} It is thus logical that many of the same themes from the previous books are discussed in \textit{Dog Years}, albeit in different manners. \textit{Vergangenheitsbewältigung} becomes the novel’s central theme, but guilt, violence, and persecution are also discussed.

While Grass alludes to \textit{Vergangenheitsbewältigung} in \textit{The Tin Drum} and \textit{Cat and Mouse}, he makes it the driving theme in \textit{Dog Years}. The protagonist Brauchsel or Brauxel or simply Amsel contracts two other narrators to tell the story, or more accurately, their version of his story.\textsuperscript{15} Despite its three narrators, \textit{Dog Years} can thus be understood as the story of a single man. Amsel’s story begins far before World War II as he accompanies a friend, Walter Matern, on a walk around the Weichsel River. Like all young boys, they enjoyed throwing stones in the water, but on that day not a single stone was to be found. Without the stone, “the pocketknife in Matern’s hand
[became] warmer. Amsel had given it to him” (14). Matern threw Amsel’s gift—a gift that had made the two boys blood brothers—into the water. This symbolic gesture foreshadows Matern’s coming betrayal of his half-Jewish friend Amsel. Decades later, the scene is repeated as Amsel alias Goldmäulchen (Goldenmouth), dredges the entire Weichsel River to find the pocketknife and return it to Matern. As expected, Matern is unable to resist throwing it back into the water. While Grass uses the first throw to foreshadow betrayal, the second alludes to the difficulty of Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Matern’s attempts to make amends for his past become fruitless and laughable as he repeats his original act of betrayal.

Walter Matern’s guilt is exceptional. While it’s true that he was an SA member, so were many other Germans. What separates him from the other SA men is his betrayal and beating of Eddi Amsel, the friend he used to protect as a boy. As the SA men encircled Amsel, it was Matern who threw the first blow. It was Matern who punched out Amsel’s teeth. After the war, however, Matern remembers events differently. Unemployed and burdened with guilt and shame, he finds himself in the Cologne train station, which his description transforms into a secular church. While using the restroom, Matern finds the names and addresses of his accomplices on the bathroom wall and begins to plot revenge against those who harmed his friend. This scene is absurd on two levels. First, Matern—who led the attack against Amsel—tasks himself with finding justice for his friend. Grass uses Matern to symbolize the guilty members of FRG society who, overlooking their own guilt, search it out in others. Second, Matern’s revenge originates in a train station bathroom, a room intended for the lowest and most grotesque bodily functions. From the beginning, the plot is to be understood as absurd and immoral.

Insofar as Matern attempts to place blame for Amsel’s attack upon his accomplices, he seeks to avoid admitting his own responsibility. His attempts at revenge most often take on a sexual nature, as he sleeps with the wives or daughters of his former friends. Matern’s promiscuity leads to a gonorrheal infection, which makes his sexual “justice” all the more grotesque. Matern never truly achieves justice for Amsel, though. His visits to his former accomplices always take the form a perverted or immoral act, and his revenge goes unfulfilled.

Matern’s attempts at revenge are absurd and grotesque. They also uniformly punish the innocent, such as women or children, rather than Matern’s former accomplices. During a visit with the Leblich family, for example, Matern breaks a fountain pen—one of the children’s Christmas presents—but later replaces it to assuage his conscience. Still consumed by revenge, he first considers raping Leblich’s six year old daughter, but settles for killing Leblich’s canary when the daughter proves unavailable. Another former friend was not so lucky; Matern slept with his teenage daughter during his visit. Despite having rejected National Socialism after the war, Matern’s attempts at Vergangenheitsbewältigung merely provide his evil impulses with another avenue of expression.
Like the FRG society which he symbolizes, Matern’s attempt at Vergangenheitsbewältigung is superficial, an attempt to relegate guilt to another party. However, “in the year 1955, as all of the children born in the peace year of 1945 [turned] 10, the Wunderbrille appeared from Brauxel & Co., preventing all attempts at secrecy” (595).16 Brauxel & Co.’s Wunderbrille function as a fantastic, if absurd, polygraph which prevent all attempts at equivocation.17

Those glasses, which Brauxel & Co. sent to market in the hundreds of thousands, made parents transparent… Father and mother, moreover: each adult, as soon as he reached his thirtieth year – the glasses probed, recognized, and, even worse, disrobed them (598).

Matern’s ability to deny his guilt is lost as soon as he buys his putative daughter Willi a pair of Wunderbrille.18 After wearing the glasses, Willi instantly discovers Matern’s guilt and his past crimes.

Matern is later threatened with the Wunderbrille in one of the most striking chapters of the Danzig Trilogy. Naively, he agrees to take part in a “Discussion with our [German] Past.” The radio program begins with an absurd and perverted prayer: “O great Creator of the dynamic and ever applicable World Dialogue….stand by us, for we wish to fully discuss the readily approachable discussion topic of Walter Matern (628). The consequence of this discussion—or more aptly inquisition—is that Matern must admit that he killed a dog in an act of political resistance, that he later adopted Hitler’s former dog, that he called his friend Amsel a kike, and that he beat Amsel on a fateful winter day.19 This last admission came only when his interrogator, his putative daughter Willi, examines him through the Wunderbrille. Grass thus suggests that Germany’s Vergangenheitsbewältigung cannot be voluntary but must rather be arrived at through interrogation by an innocent party. This foreshadows the conflict in the 1960s between the 1968 Generation and their parents over German crimes during National Socialism.

The origin of the Wunderbrille with Brauxel & Co. alludes to the role of the victim in Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Amsel suffered the most of all the characters in Dog Years, and he thus has the greatest interest in the admission of the truth. Indeed, Brauxel develops his Wunderbrille in response to the FRG’s unwillingness to confront its National Socialist past. With his Wunderbrille, Brauxel becomes West Germany’s collective conscience, and the one-time victim becomes his persecutors’ judge.

As in The Tin Drum, Grass rejects the concept of youthful innocence. If Matern’s guilty conscience reminds him of his past sins, Tulla Pokriefke symbolizes the conscienceless, uniformly evil individual. Tulla bullies young Jenny Brunies because of her Roma heritage, packing her in snow and leaving her to freeze in the woods. Similarly, Tulla shuts Jenny and her cousin in a deep freeze warehouse. It is Tulla who reports Jenny’s father Oswald Brunies to the police.
His crime? He longed for small candies—unavailable during wartime—and stole his students’ vitamins as a replacement. Tulla also bullies Eddi Amsel because of his Jewish heritage, such as when she forbids him to sketch their family dog.

Tulla symbolizes the National Socialist woman. She longs for an Aryan pregnancy, reeks of bone dust, and steadfastly follows the race laws. Her barbaric character contradicts the ostensible innocence of women and of children. In the Danzig Trilogy, none of the Germans are innocent. Each is partially or wholly tinged with the stain of National Socialism.

The depictions of National Socialist violence are particularly grotesque. The attack on Eddi Amsel is described as follows: “Nine fists found a tenth face, which [Matern’s] fist split in half. And as the nine fists tired, [Matern’s] fist carried on. And as all the teeth were missing, [Matern] choked out a scream. And Kike Kike Kike was [Matern’s] refrain” (665). Jenny Brunies is attacked in a similar manner. The neighborhood children, led by Tulla Pokriefke, bury her in the snow, and Jenny lost her toes to frostbite as a result. Jenny’s father Oswald was also a victim of National Socialism, placed in a concentration camp for his petty theft of vitamins from his school’s supply.

The concentration camps—the best known symbols of National Socialist crimes—are explicitly referenced for the first time in the Danzig Trilogy in *Dog Years*. In one of *Dog Years*’ many subplots, Tulla Pokriefke’s cousin, Harry Liebenau, is bothered by an unidentifiable smell in his army unit’s camp. It would waft over from a nearby hill, which lay before a factory and a pair of railway tracks. The hill was later called Bone Hill, “its name since Harry’s cousin Tulla spit the name in its direction” (403). Tulla’s description was accurate. The bones of the dead concentration camp victims were deposited at Bone Hill, a fact of which the Danzig population was well aware. Grass implies that those who knew without acting share the burden of guilt. If one knows of a crime, yet does nothing to stop it, is one not also guilty? This is one of the central questions with which individual Germans had to contend after the war.

Persecution is also discussed in *Dog Years* as part of the greater theme of National Socialist violence. Eddi Amsel and Jenny and Oswald Brunies become victims of the National Socialist hysteria, each symbolizing a different persecuted group. Eddi—Jews; Jenny—Roma; and Oswald—political prisoners. Together with Albrecht Greff (homosexual) and Oskar Matzerath (disabled) in *The Tin Drum*, these characters symbolize National Socialism’s victims.

Greff committed suicide and Oskar joined his persecutors on the National Socialist stage. In contrast to the passivity of *The Tin Drum*, the characters in *Dog Years* react actively. Oswald, who dies in the concentration camp, symbolizes the targeted internment of supposed enemies of the state. Although Oswald meets a negative end, Amsel and Jenny form positive responses
to their persecution in the form of inner and outer resistance. Jenny, a delicate ballerina, learns to turn her weakness into strength. Jenny comforts Harry when they find themselves locked into the deep freeze warehouse by Tulla. “Now, you mustn’t freeze anymore, Harry. You know, I was once hidden inside a snowman. And as I was inside, I learned much” (349). This symbolic meaning of this passage is clear. Shut in the deep freeze warehouse (the National Socialist Reich) by an evil individual (Tulla or, symbolically, the Nazis), Jenny learns how to survive by calling upon her inner strength.

Amsel’s resistance followed a different path. Jenny pulled back from society—she changed her appearance and moved to Berlin—but Amsel adopted an entirely new personality. After the attack, he left his home of Danzig-Langfuhr and took a new name. He replaced his broken smile with golden teeth, founded a successful business as a scarecrow producer, and became unrecognizable to his former friends and acquaintances. Only Harry Liebenau was able to see through Amsel’s disguises. As Amsel, then Haseloff, returned to Danzig, Liebenau listed his many aliases: “I once knew someone, looked like you, was named something different... He first was named Steppuhn, then he was named Sperbella, then Sperlinski. Do you know him?” (387). Liebenau was in this respect unique. Even Matern, whose Vergangenheitsbewältigung centered on his attack upon Amsel, was unable to recognize his old friend.

Although Amsel’s sudden transformation is absurd, it has symbolic importance. In contrast to his former persecutors, Amsel was able to overcome his attack and move on with his life. Amsel recognized the tragedy of his past and was nonetheless, or perhaps resultantly, able to become a successful businessman. Grass thus suggests that only the victims of National Socialism will be able to undergo a successful Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Matern, whose postwar existence is supposedly predicated on repentance, never admits his own guilt. When he speaks of the attack on Amsel, he neglects to count himself among the attackers. As a result of his purposeful omission, Matern remains an unfulfilled and detestable man, unable to recognize his former victim. Grass uses physical characteristics to highlight this contrast between attacker and victim. Amsel/Brauxel/Goldmäulchen is an eminent businessman while Matern—infected with gonorrhea—remains unemployed, homeless, and plagued by a persecution complex.

Rather than removing himself from society, Amsel blends in. As a young man, he was already known for his scarecrows, and he turns this into a business after the war. However, Amsel’s scarecrows have a far different effect after the war than before. As a child before the war, Amsel’s created anthropomorphic scarecrows which functioned as protection against the world which persecuted him. When Amsel clothed his scarecrows in SA uniforms, he transformed the National Socialist threat into the absurd. The SA men/scarecrows were only superficially threatening; underneath they were fully without substance.
Amsel’s post-war scarecrows become even more frightening and grotesque. After his unsuccessful interview for the radio play, Matern flees east, to East Berlin. On his way, “Scarecrows—Don’t look out the window!—pulled themselves up from their roots” (672). Through his scarecrows, Amsel becomes the persecutor, or more aptly, a representative of justice. Matern cowers before the scarecrows, which remind him of his past crimes. His fright only increases as he visits the scarecrow factory with Brauchsel. The two men ride deeper and deeper into the mine in which the factory is situated, a journey with close parallels to Dante’s Inferno. Indeed, Brauchsel and Matern travel through multiple levels in the factory, each with its own hellish scarecrow. Matern immediately recognizes these parallels and continuously refers to the factory as “Hell.” For Matern, the trip through the factory is a personal hell, and the reader can understand it as the culmination of Amsel’s revenge.

Conclusion

The Danzig Trilogy is one of the most important works in German post-war literature. To paraphrase Walter Jens, Günter Grass created a new genre of German literature—Vergangenheitsbewältigung—with his first three books. Although earlier German authors had discussed German guilt, Grass was the first to discuss an all-encompassing guilt, which included even children. Grass wanted to lay bare the barbarity of National Socialism, and he used grotesque and absurd symbolism to this effect. When he wrote the trilogy, that was the only way in which one could describe such an immoral and perverted era. As a result, the Danzig Trilogy is a difficult work to read. Not only do the three books contain subtle symbolism, but German readers were forced to confront their country’s National Socialist past. Grass passes judgment on an entire people, a people which let Hitler seize power and was silent during genocide. Grass does not admit the existence of innocent Germans, only those who were born after the war.

Grass’ intended the Danzig Trilogy to be disconcerting and uncomfortable so as to challenge his readers. Oskar Matzerath, The Tin Drum’s narrator, is a perverted gnome who not only bears responsibility for his fathers’ deaths, but commits particularly violent and blasphemous acts. Cat and Mouse is the story of Joachim Mahlke, the once pious Catholic, who chooses the German army over the Catholic Church. Later, as he decides to desert, he is likely betrayed by his friend Heinrich Pilenz. Dog Years also treats the theme of betrayal. Eddi Amsel and Jenny Brunies, a Jew and a Roma, are betrayed by their friends during the Nazi era.

All three books have a close connection to the theme of Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Oskar Matzerath recognizes his guilt and spends his later years trying to understand his crimes and make amends. Heinrich Pilenz’s unending search for Joachim Mahlke is also a form of Vergan-
So long as Mahlke remains missing, Pilenz continues to bear the guilt for his disappearance. The fates of the main characters in *Dog Years*—Matern and Amsel—is similarly connected. Until Matern admits his guilt in the attack on Amsel/Brauxel/Goldmäulchen, his old friend will remain hidden from him.

With his Danzig Trilogy, Grass alludes to the Germany's own incomplete *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. His novels attempt to reveal National Socialist guilt and force its public discussion. The Danzig Trilogy was very successful in accomplishing this goal, resulting in an active discussion of German guilt. Even those Germans who denied their own sins could no longer ignore the past. Interestingly, Günter Grass admitted in his 2006 autobiography *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (*Peeling the Onion*) that he had been part of the Waffen SS rather than the Wehrmacht, as he had claimed for 51 years. Although Grass’ strong criticism of former Nazis led many to brand him a hypocrite, it is worth noting how the weight of a Nazi past influenced the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* of the man who invented the genre.
1. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a German term literally meaning “overcoming of the past,” can refer to several different concepts. After WWII, Germany and Judaism struggled with reconciliation in light of German crimes during the Holocaust. Germany also had to accept its defeat by the Allies, which required a radical rethinking of German identity and strength. Finally, Germany had to admit its own guilt in WWII, particularly the mass extermination of millions of Jews, Roma, homosexuals, and disabled persons. When this paper makes use of the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, it is to be understood according to this last concept.

2. It’s true that earlier authors, such as Heinrich Böll, discussed National Socialism in their works, and the effect of short stories like “Traveler, are you coming to Spa…,” “One time in Odessa,” and “Outside before the door” is undeniable. However, these works primarily discuss how Germans were affected by the war. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* differentiates itself from this earlier Trümmerliteratur (literally, “rubble literature”) insofar as it treats the subject of German guilt. The differences between these two genres would be an interesting basis for further study.

3. Oskar Matzerath is the best representation of this simultaneous guilt and innocence in the Danzig Trilogy. The section on *The Tin Drum* will show how Oskar symbolizes the individual *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Oskar is not only guilty of his own individual crimes, but also displays knowledge of the larger socio-political crimes which characterized the National Socialist state. Interestingly, Grass’ characters’ capacity for both good and evil foreshadowed society’s surprise at the Eichmann trial (1961) and the Milgram (1961) and Zimbardo (1971) experiments. Most members of the public were shocked that “normal” or “civilized” individuals were capable of such brutality.

4. The move from Danzig to Düsseldorf symbolizes another type of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—that which was precipitated by the loss of former German or culturally German territories following World War II.

5. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Danzig Trilogy are mine. If interested in reading the Danzig Trilogy in translation, the Ralph Manheim translations are excellent and quite faithful to the originals.
6. Grass finally admitted in 2006 that that he had been a member of the Waffen SS. The announcement coincided with the publication of his memoirs, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (*Peeling the Onion*), and was seen by many as a publicity stunt. As a result of Grass’ long standing advocacy for openness about individuals’ National Socialist past, many of his critics branded him a hypocrite.

7. The Kashubians are a Slavic ethnic group concentrated in north-central Poland.

8. In the original, Grass calls the national guardsmen *Heimwehrmänner*, literally meaning “men of the homeland defense.” In the context of the attack on the Polish post office, they’re best understood as German soldiers.

9. Many Germans claimed to have been part of the inner emigration or resistance after the war. These terms refer to a passive resistance in which Germans would reject National Socialism in their lives. While some Germans embraced the concept of inner emigration during the rise of Nazism and far before WWII, others did so opportunistically after 1945.

10. Oskar gives up his drum after the death of his father Alfred by symbolically throwing it into Alfred’s grave. Immediately thereafter, he begins to cry, whereby Schugger Leo (an oddly prophetic former seminarian who attends each local funeral) exclaims: “Look at the Lord, how he grows, oh, how he grows!” (535). Leo’s religious imagery is purposeful and alludes to an amazing change. Oskar develops a hunchback, which the reader is led to understand as a symbol of his guilt. More importantly, Oskar’s negative traits disappear with the rejection of his drum. Only when he resumes drumming—and Oskar must be forcibly brought to this point—do these reappear. The reader is thus led to believe that the omniscience supplied by Oskar’s drum is accompanied by the seduction of evil behavior.

11. The SA or *Sturmabteilung* (Assault Detachment) was the military wing of the National Socialist party.

12. The *Novelle* was a particularly popular style in the 19th century. In its classical form, it is characterized by a small group of characters, a rejection of character development (e.g., personality traits are static), a shocking event at the story’s beginning, and a sudden, unexpected ending.

13. This is/was a particularly pertinent issue for the Catholic Church, as the Vatican was the first foreign government to recognize the new National Socialist regime in 1933.

14. Tulla first appears in *Cat and Mouse* as a foil to Mahlke’s sexual modesty.
15. *Dog Years'* protagonist Eddi Amsel is known by many names. Brauchsel, Brauxel, Amsel, and Goldmäulchen (Goldenmouth) are only some of his aliases.

16. *Wunderbrille* can be translated in English as either *Wonder Glasses* or *Miracle Glasses*. I chose the term *Miracle Glasses*, which I used at the beginning of this paper, because I feel that it better conveys the absurdity in Grass's work.

17. Brauxel is another of Amsel's aliases.

18. Like Oskar in *The Tin Drum*, Willi Sawatzki, a supporting character, has two putative fathers—her mother's husband and Matern.

19. In the German original, Matern calls Amsel Itzich, a pejorative for Jews. The term "kike" most closely conveys the intended venom of the term, although it is not a literal translation.

20. The German is very lyrical, and the beauty of the language contrasts strongly with the words' content. Rather than minimizing their effect, the lyricism draws the reader's attention to the barbarity of the attack.

21. The narrator, Heinrich Pilenz, insinuates that the Oswald was actually punished for his membership in the Free Masons and that the vitamins served as a cover.
WORKS CITED


