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The Swedish Spätaufklärer: Both Grass and Vonnegut Deserved Prizes

Both Grass and Vonnegut deserved prizes for their writing, but only Günter Grass matched The Swedish Academy's limited definition of complex and accomplished. In The Swedish Academy's 1999 announcement that Günter Grass had won the Nobel Prize in Literature, the group's Permanent Secretary noted that Grass once described himself as a "Spätaufklärer," a delayed student of enlightenment, and this loaded label somewhat ironically applies to The Swedish Academy itself as well. The German adjective *spät* means "late" or "belated" ("spat"), and the German masculine noun *Aufklärer* means "philosopher of the Enlightenment" ("Aufklärer"). The Swedish Academy, largely unaware of Grass's connections to the *Waffen-SS*, selected Günter Grass as the 1999 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature because of his commitment to subtlety and to telling previously untold stories. Kurt Vonnegut, author of *Mother Night* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, on the other hand, approached historical fiction with a possibly off-putting bluntness. Because of his candor and sardonic style, Kurt Vonnegut was overlooked for the Nobel Prize in Literature, while—perhaps ironically—The Swedish Academy honored Günter Grass's ability to pick through the expanse of World War II history and expose dormant lies.

The initial appeal of Günter Grass was straightforward enough: Grass was a prolific writer whose nuanced approaches to historically fueled fiction and nonfiction offered a pinch of controversy without being wholly subversive—or so The Swedish Academy thought at the time.

The language used by The Swedish Academy highlights their interests in Grass's semi-provocative nature: "[The novel *Ein weites Feld*] has been a source of contention for German literary critics, but it confirms the author's position as the great prober of the history of this century" (Engdahl). Grass's work is described as an "arena for voices," an "excavation of the past," and a "dialogue with the great traditions of German culture, conducted with punctilious affection," all of which emphasize the penetrating nature with which Grass supposedly approaches the past. Grass is presented as a moral and factual detective, someone who "unearths the intertwined roots of good and evil" and uncovers the "lies that people wanted to forget because they had once believed in them." In short, Günter Grass had just enough depth and reputation to be universally compelling.

The writings of Günter Grass—especially his use of diction and imagery—support this analysis. In a chapter of his post-Nobel Prize novel *Peeling the Onion*, Grass makes grandiose statements about memory before offering a series of vivid rhetorical questions. "Memory likes to refer to blind spots" (162), he writes—ironically, as the world later learns—and compares lost details to "scraps of feeling and thought" that pass through the "mesh" of our minds, painting humanity as hungry for "something to chew on." Offering these "scraps" to readers is what made Günter Grass famous. Grass's pre-Nobel Prize novel *The Tin Drum* is filled with such "scraps," and this phenomenon is explained in Vittlar's response to Oskar's "raft story" (27). Vittlar proposes that the man under the raft is Oskar's great-uncle or grandfather and comments vividly on the lack of body found by the raft: ". . . he didn't give you the satisfaction of a grandchild who points proudly at a swollen, waterlogged corpse . . ." (28). Vittlar continues, clarifying his assessment of the grandfather's intentions: "Your grandfather cheated the world and his grandchild of a corpse so that posterity and his grandchild would be worrying their heads about

him for years to come” (28). Strangely, Vittlar celebrates the grandfather’s action—“He’s a hero”—which speaks to Grass’s own appreciation of having enough “scraps” to find as a writer. In this way, Günter Grass is somehow both critic and creator, both accuser and accused. Grass critiques the tunnel-visioned manner with which history is often presented, yet his career rests on a foundation of omission, both as a writer and as a person. Put simply, Grass offers enough “scraps” to be compelling, but he stops short of a true depiction or indictment of evil, which makes him uniquely relatable as a storyteller—a counterrevolutionary in the clothes of a rebel. It is universality through contradiction.

The writings of Kurt Vonnegut, on the other hand, present no such universality. Vonnegut’s approach to tragedy is bluntness (sometimes fantastical bluntness, but bluntness nonetheless). In *Beautiful War: Studies in a Dreadful Fascination*, for example, author Philip Biedler notes that some have accused Vonnegut of “trivializing the Holocaust” (125). Biedler reminds readers that Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, responds to a conversation about World War II with “I was a prisoner of war. . . . We don’t even have to talk about it. . . . I just want you to know” (124), and Biedler explains that Vonnegut himself “seems to have been content to leave the message pretty much at that.” Even Vonnegut’s approach to his visual artwork—which Vonnegut called “as rare as exotic postage stamps”—captures this simplicity: “I just sit and wait to see what’s inside me . . . and then it comes out,” Vonnegut once wrote (Wick). Vonnegut writes like a lumberjack: it does not matter how one approaches the tree because the goal is the always the same.

This candor is what makes Vonnegut a celebrated writer and a poor Nobel Prize candidate—as well as the opposite of writers like Günter Grass. In many ways, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Mother Night* is a denunciation of the kind of moral and historical subtlety that Grass espouses.

Scholars Edward Jamosky and Jerome Klinkowitz explain that *Mother Night* “explores the oddities of twentieth-century behavior and ascribes them to a style of schizophrenia that allows persons and nations to indulge in pretenses and divided loyalties” (216-217). For Grass, as noted in *Peeling the Onion*, the distinction between “experiences” and “stories” (the “schizophrenia” that Jamosky and Klinkowitz discuss) is important (172), and he attempts to walk the line between experiences and stories, often commenting on both the difficulty and the importance of identifying which is which. For Vonnegut—the writer of the line “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be”—no such distinction is made. In *Mother Night*, Howard W. Campbell, Jr.’s matter-of-fact approach to observational sentimentality has a peculiar clarity: “Nationalities just don’t interest me as much as they probably should” (39), he says when responding to an inquiry about labels. Campbell knows himself surprisingly well, as noted in his explanation of his need for love: “No matter what I was . . . uncritical love was what I needed” (44). Vonnegut’s authenticity is housed in the idea that truth is always present. When introducing Howard W. Campbell, Jr.—an “American by birth” and “Nazi by reputation”—Vonnegut overshadows Campbell’s matter-of-fact inner monologue with the presence of a typewriter that contains a key with “the twin lightning strokes used for the dreaded S.S.” (12). Whatever Campbell writes, regardless of being experience or story, he will write it on a machine designed by the Nazis.

What some see as trivialization is arguably an attempt to honor the simple authenticity of stories, but this analysis of Vonnegut’s approach to history may not flourish in an organization that awarded a Nobel Prize to Günter Grass for “frolicsome black fables” that “portray the forgotten face of history” (“Günter Grass: Facts”). To Vonnegut, evil is evil, and it need not be qualified: “The drama at Auschwitz . . . was about man’s inhumanity to man” (Biedler 125).

Vonnegut returns to this idea—the bleakness of inhumanity—throughout his work, even to the point of labeling it as his primary focus: “That is the dominant theme of what I have written during the last forty-five years or so.” Some may be tempted to dismiss Vonnegut’s lack of a Nobel Prize as further evidence of The Swedish Academy’s disdain for American intellectualism—“American intellectuals have long been dismissed by Europeans” writes Ian Crouch in *The New Yorker*—but Vonnegut’s lack of Swedish acknowledgement seems more specific. In many ways, Vonnegut’s writing is more clearly “frolicsome” and “black” than Grass’s, but it is also more direct, almost to the point of directly mocking individuals with Günter Grass’s brand of rationalized morality. Cases can be made about the merits of Vonnegut’s body of work, but Kurt Vonnegut was never going to win the Nobel Prize for Literature because bluntness stings more than subtlety. Sara Danius, a former member of The Swedish Academy, once said that the “Nobel Prize in Literature is awarded to someone who has done outstanding work in an idealistic direction that adds the greatest benefit to humankind” (Hicks). Kurt Vonnegut’s worldview, including his thoughts about World War II, is realistic, not idealistic.

In the end, Günter Grass’s well-described struggle with truth and lies—with experiences and stories—reached a climax when he told the world that he had been a member of the *Waffen-SS*, and The Swedish Academy has attempted to reframe their appreciation of Grass in response to this revelation. The current NobelPrize.org page for Grass includes a note that Grass “grew up in Danzig during World War II and joined the Waffen-SS, something he comes to terms with in the autobiographical novel *Peeling the Onion* (2006)” (“Günter Grass: Facts”), and it is quickly followed by a sentence about Grass’s progressive activism. “Among other things, he criticized the 1961 erection of the Berlin Wall,” the sentence reads. In *Crabwalk*, Grass describes a

viewing of Frank Wisbar's real-life drama film *Darkness Fell on Gotenhafen* (or *Nacht fiel über Gotenhafen* in German), and he comments on the countless victims who were not included in the film's scenes. Grass writes, "One zero more or less—what does it matter? In statistics, what disappears behind rows of numbers is death" (145). Grass's complexity appealed to The Swedish Academy, but his search for meaning left out important scenes. True, perhaps The Swedish Academy has attempted to recontextualize their German hero, but a "Spätaufklärer," while enlightened, is still enlightened too late. As Grass writes in *Crabwalk*, "past omissions came to roost" (143)—for both Grass and The Swedish Academy. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, conversely, ends with a simple, declarative observation about life and tragedy: "So it goes."

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