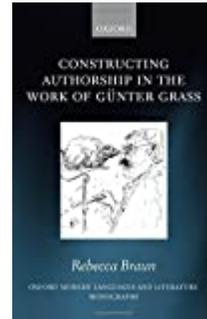




Rebecca Braun. *Constructing Authorship in the Work of Günter Grass.* Oxford Modern Languages and Literatures. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008. viii + 197 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-954270-3.



Reviewed by David Clarke (Department of European Studies and Modern Languages, University of Bath)

Published on H-German (August, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Will the Real Günter Grass Please Stand Up?

Rebecca Braun's engaging and thoughtful book on the construction of authorship in selected works by Günter Grass provides a series of closely argued, enlightening readings of texts in which Grass reflects upon his own status as an engaged author and public intellectual in the postwar Federal Republic of Germany, and in which he also enters into an often highly playful dialogue with his own public image. As Braun's analysis shows, it is the latter tendency that dominates Grass's work when he references his status as an author. This effect is perhaps unsurprising, given that Grass can lay claim to greater media exposure than any other living German writer. Such attention has often been fueled by controversies relating either to his fiction itself, or to Grass as an individual, as in the debate about his Waffen-SS membership, which erupted in 2006 around the publication of his autobiographical text *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*.^[1]

What Braun is not offering, however, is a description of Grass's changing media image over the five decades of his fame. Certain key developments in that changing

image are mentioned when the analyzed texts respond to them, but the investigation of the textual Grass, that version of himself that he produces as either narrating or narrated subject, stands at the center of this interpretative endeavor. This approach produces a series of very useful analyses, but does weaken somewhat the claim in the introduction that the book will engage with Grass's "manipulat[ion] of his authorial position in literature" as a way of "successfully negotiating the media-led public sphere" (p. 6). The nature of this "media-led public sphere," how it functions, and the role it assigns to literary intellectuals remain rather shadowy and can be taken as shorthand for "the popular image of Grass as it appears in the German press." This reduction does not particularly detract from the analyses themselves, but does mean that the book's key audience will be Grass scholars rather than others interested in thinking about the relationship of postwar German literary intellectuals to the public sphere through this key example.

The book does not approach Grass's work in a straightforwardly chronological way, but does trace a

development over time, which is brought up to date with a discussion of perhaps his most significant post-unification works *Ein weites Feld* (1995) and *Im Krebsgang* (2002). Apart from the first chapter, which addresses the novel *Das Treffen in Telgte* (1979), and the second chapter on Grass's political writings, the analyses proceed by pairing works that are identified as addressing similar issues in their presentation of authorship. *Das Treffen in Telgte*, Grass's tribute to the ambitions of Gruppe 47, is chosen for the first chapter in order to outline three key "models of authorship" that will be important for the remaining analyses. Braun defines these as "the author as a political figure," "the author as a textual position," and the author as "an ironic construct" (p. 14). The first of these is clear and will be familiar to most readers: it is the model of an author engaged in public debate, who sets out, possibly with other intellectuals, to assert the influence of *Geist* over *Macht*. The second type of authorship is less obvious from the term attributed to it: here Braun refers to the use of stand-in figures whose function it is "not to represent the author, but rather a concept of authorship that only partly corresponds to that of GÃ¼nter Grass" (p. 27). In turn, these stand-in figures are played off against one another (p. 30) in order to test the validity of their various positions. Finally, the notion of the author as "ironic construct" refers to Grass's construction of an "authorial 'plurality of self'" (p. 37) that escapes the "overly personalized cult of the author's image, his construction in the media-led public sphere" (p. 36). Braun does not address all three models in each of her chapters, but rather foregrounds particular models as they become appropriate to Grass's textual strategies in the individual texts.

Particularly engaging is chapter 3, which addresses both *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* (1972) (a text that famously draws upon Grass's campaigning for Willy Brandt and the Social Democrats from the mid-1960s onwards) and the later *Kopfgebirten* (1980). Braun argues that Grass, in markedly different ways in each case, is attempting to distance himself from his public image, which has become the necessary but still burdensome side effect of his political engagement. Either by creating a variety of fictional versions of himself within the text (*Tagebuch*) or emphasizing the creative autonomy of the author who fashions himself in the very act of writing (*Kopfgebirten*), Grass is presented as resisting the limitations of his public role through the reassertion of his creative freedom. In the following chapter on *Der Butt* (1977) and *Die RÃttin* (1986), however, Braun makes the case for Grass's declining faith in such creative auton-

omy and a retreat to a more defensive position: here the author figures, who exhibit many similarities with Grass himself, attempt to reassert their narrative control "in an effort to compensate a loss of influence in the socio-political sphere" (p. 121), yet are ultimately unable to "salvage [their] sense of self" (p. 121) as their authority is constantly undermined within the text. Chapter 5 covers *Zunge zeigen* (1988) and *Mein Jahrhundert* (1999), and represents an attempt to widen the debate out from Grass's prose narratives. These hybrid works, incorporating graphic art and, in the latter case, a plethora of narrators in shorter texts, represent something of a paradox, Braun suggests. On the one hand, while their montage approach and plurality of voices might be taken to represent the dissolution of the writer's authority as author of his own texts and the source of meaning, on the other, their skillful organization still points to the creative presence of the author (p. 147). In her final chapter, Braun turns to *Ein weites Feld* and *Im Krebsgang*. Refreshingly, rather than discussing the media debates surrounding the controversial aspects of these texts, her focus remains clearly on the presentation of authorship, a matter of particular interest here because Grass now appears as a figure in his own fictions, which are supposedly narrated by his own fictional creations. Yet again, as with *Zunge zeigen* and *Mein Jahrhundert*, Braun suggests that even this apparent distance to his own persona is not necessarily to be interpreted as a critical one. Indeed, as she convincingly argues in relation to *Im Krebsgang*, it becomes the job of the narrator, Paul Pokriefke, to emulate the Grassian model of responsible authorship, despite his initial resistance.

As is clear from above, Rebecca Braun has produced a series of intriguing analyses that are both carefully argued and thought-provoking. They will encourage many readers to return to Grass with fresh eyes, although, as already stated, this is very much a book aimed at those who are already well informed about the author's work. Braun assumes the reader's familiarity with the general themes and narratives of the texts she discusses, which is a perfectly reasonable approach given the nature of her project, but which may present difficulties for undergraduate readers, for example. Also, the second chapter, which discusses Grass's political speeches and essays, is less persuasive than those dealing with his fiction. Braun implies that Grass's shifting presentation of the function of the author in society in this non-literary mode demonstrates his conscious policy of "repeatedly reinventing himself" (p. 64), playfully trying on different authorial roles just as, as Braun argues, he does in his fiction. This

reading does not, of course, take into account the possibility that Grass might simply have changed his mind over the years about the function of literary intellectuals in political life and that at each stage in this development he has held a different position with absolute sincerity and conviction. Leaving this problem aside, however, Braun's book can be recommended as an engaging and very worthwhile contribution to Grass scholarship.

Note

[1]. Braun only makes brief mention of *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, doubtlessly due to its appearance so close to her own deadline, but has since developed her argument in relation to this autobiographical text in an enlightening article. See Braun, " 'Mich in Variationen erzählen': Günter Grass and the Ethics of Autobiography," *Modern Language Review* 103 (2008): 1051-1066.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: David Clarke. Review of Braun, Rebecca, *Constructing Authorship in the Work of Günter Grass*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24689>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.