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Is Grass more restricted...? A dispute over the Nobel laureate (and more)

Thesis: The poem by Grass in this dispute is of secondary importance. From the debates concerning *What must be said* it is not possible to derive the complete and unambiguous stance of its author. However, the dispute itself revealed the (over)sensitivity and traumatically deep mental layers of the German and Israeli intelligentsia.

Grass is more restricted, because:

- he is a German,
- he was a Nazi and SS member in his youth,
- he was hiding his (voluntary?) service in *Waffen-SS* for years,
- he is sometimes anti-Semitic,
- he often preaches and moralizes, but lacks the moral authority to do so.

These are the conclusions that one might reach after reading the numerous statements, interviews and reviews which appeared in the German press (among others) after April 4, when the poem of Günter Grass entitled *Was gesagt werden muß* (*What must be said*; or, more adequately, *What should be said*) appeared in 'Süddeutsche Zeitung'.

The characteristic nature of the polemics over Grass' text comes from three sources: 1) the unusually emotional **fierceness of the attacks** on the Nobel laureate **and their frequency**; 2) the differences in the assessment of Grass' text, **which cannot be easily explained by the national or ideological affiliation of its authors**; 3) the **saturation** of the **biotope-dispute** with actors-politicians and the argumentation with the **political element** of the polemics with the Nobel laureate in **literature**.

But this is not all. The next relevant question to ask is **why** all of this happened. The answer should be looked for in his short, but multi-layered text. Not only there, however. Grass' poem is not literary in the more narrow meaning of the word and it is not very poetic. It is legitimately mocked by some critics, but this is not the center of the dispute.

The most important verses for an understanding of the dispute over the text, which the author announced as a poem, are the following in the English translation by Breon Mitchell (internet: Pokazywarka 5.04.2012, highlights by H.O.): Why have I kept silent, held back so long, // on something openly practised in // war games, ... // It's the alleged right to a first strike // that could destroy an Iranian people // subjugated by a loudmouth // and gathered in organized rallies, // because an atom bomb **may be** being // developed within his arc of power. // **Yet why do I hesitate** to name // that other land in which // for years – although kept secret – // a **growing nuclear power has existed // beyond supervision or verification**, // subject to no inspection of any kind? // This general silence on the facts, // before which my own silence has bowed, // **seems to me a troubling, enforced lie**, // leading to a likely punishment // the moment it's broken: // **the verdict "Anti-semitism" falls easily**. // But now that my own country, // **brought in time after time // for questioning about its own crimes**, // profound and beyond compare, // has delivered yet another submarine to Israel, // (in what is purely a business transaction, // though glibly declared an act of reparation) // whose speciality consists in its ability // to direct nuclear warheads toward // an area in which not a single atom bomb // has yet been proved to exist, its feared // existence proof enough, I'll say what must be said. // But why have I kept silent till now? // Because I thought my own origins, // tarnished by a stain that can never be removed, // meant I could not expect Israel, a land // to which I am, and always will be, attached, // to accept this open declaration of the truth. // Why only now, grown old, // and with what ink remains, do I say: // Israel's atomic power endangers // an already fragile world peace? // Because what must be said // may be too late tomorrow; // and because – burdened enough as Germans – // we may be providing material for a crime // ... // And granted: I've broken my silence // **because I'm sick of the West's hypocrisy**; // and I hope too that many may be freed from their silence, ... //.

The three threads of Grass' text, with different levels of generality, faced crushing criticism. The reasons are: 1) the statement concerning Israel's uncontrolled accumulation of a **+nuclear arsenal** against Iran, which may endanger world peace; 2) the thesis about the **instrumentalization of the discourse about anti-Semitism** by (not only) Israel when facing any political criticism; 3) **the confession (of guilt)** in relation to the many years of silence about Israel, because of auto-censorship and political correctness.



The **first thread** affected the minds of **politicians** of various level and repute. The Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, described Grass' text as 'absolute scandal'. He compared the criticism of Israel's defense policy to the slandering of Jews during the Holocaust. Guido Westerwelle, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of FRG, dissociated himself from Grass' criticism of Israel. He indirectly touched upon the need to delegitimize all statements of German authors about Jews and Israel because of their past. The president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany said the poem was a 'deceitful lampoon'. Marieluise Beck, a representative of the Greens in the *Bundestag* and vice-president of the German-Israel Society, supported her criticism with a strong accusatory quotation: "Grass' text reveals the whole truth of the statement: 'The Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz.'"

There are, however, many voices **in defense** of the Nobel laureate. It is worth to mention Sigmar Gabriel, the president of *SPD*, who defended Grass against the attacks of 'hysterics'. Within the next two weeks after Grass' text had been printed in 'Süddeutsche Zeitung', the newspaper received a thousand letters from the readers supporting his critical stance.

The actors of the political scene did not stop at a political assessment of Grass' challenge. The Israeli Minister of Internal Affairs, Eli Yishai, accused the writer of inciting hate and considered him *persona non grata* in Israel. The symbolic and actual turning out of a synagogue in Gdańsk, the attempts to put pressure on the Swedish Academy to take the Nobel Prize away from Grass – these are just examples of the most spectacular and far-reaching political and legal attempts to punish the writer, but by no means the only ones.

This **political actionism** was also supplemented by other actions. Happenings, such as including Grass in the *Occupy nazifrei* action at the seventh Biennial of Modern Art in Berlin, constitute an important example. The Polish commissioner of the Biennial, Artur Żmijewski, sympathized with Grass' verbal act during a press conference: after all, art should be part of political actions.

Grass' verbal gesture had causative power also in the sense that it provoked many writers and people of culture to take their stance in the Grass-Israel-Germany dispute. It might even be said that there was unwritten pressure to express an opinion. It even forced Martin Walser to state that he has the right not to comment on Grass' text.

Many intellectuals were not able to accept not only Grass' indifference towards the threats against Israel, but mainly with his lack of understanding of (historically acquired) existential fear. Durs Grünbein talked about this in his text entitled *Grass is a preacher with a wooden hammer*.



The **second thread** resulted in a very painful **stigmatization of Grass**, namely the accusation of **anti-Semitism**. It happened several days before the attack for meddling in Israel's politics. On April 4, Henryk M. Broder hit the 'solar plexus' of Grass' German and literary identity with the very title of his article (*Günter Grass, the eternal anti-Semite*). In Germany, being accused of anti-Semitism delegitimizes the judgments and stance of any moralist. In Broder's text, which negates the **strategic** values of Grass' poem, there is a serious accusation concerning the relativization of the murder of six million Jews. The Nobel laureate states that out of the eight million prisoners enslaved by the Soviets, six million were murdered. Broder, however, corrects him by claiming that three million were enslaved and one million one hundred thousand killed.

Not everybody shared Broder's opinion with regard to Grass' anti-Semitism. Volker Schlöndorff, a director, categorically rejected these accusations and considered Grass to be entitled to criticize the policy of Israel and any other country. When it comes to the most analytically valuable statements, the one of Fritz Stern, an intellectual born in Wrocław, may serve as an example. The scholar makes a distinction between the need to defend Grass against the accusations of anti-Semitism and to condemn his deliberate **provocation** in the form of coarse criticism of Israel. But even Stern imputes to Grass that he was silent about his 'episode in Waffen-SS'!

The impact of the **third thread**, namely the discourse of doubt with regard to Grass' right to pass moral judgment and his moral authority, was the most painful blow for the writer. Several years earlier, after an interview with Grass concerning his 'episode in Waffen-SS' had been published in 'Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung' (12 August 2006), a massive wave of criticism aimed at Grass swept through Germany. The online search for "Grass&Waffen-SS" with 65 thousand hits from 2006 confirms that. The fact (not entirely!) of hiding his membership in *Waffen-SS* was treated as sufficient enough to undermine his position of a writer 'as moral authority'. The question of credibility, acting as 'the meter from Sevres' in Germany (and not only there), became one of the main axes of the heated discussion. The mentioned minister Eli Yishai even managed to find *iunctim* between the language of Grass' poem and his service in *Waffen-SS*. (Some German columnists discovered Nazi newspeak in Grass' poem!).

This last plane of the dispute, not so relevant to his political current, must have caused the writer the greatest pain. It concerned his credibility and coherence of identity. Among the critical text one could even find true psychograms. One of the most important columnists, Frank Schirrmacher, tried to intelligently-maliciously find a 'document of revenge' in Grass' text, a revenge driven by identity deficits.



Conclusions:

- The direct results of the dispute over 'Grass (and his text)' comprised (1) the intensification of the German internal debate on Israel's policy concerning nuclear weapons and Palestinians, (2) the emphasis of the 'special relationship (*Sonderbeziehungen*)' between Germany and Israel and (3) journalistic portrayal of Germany as a land longed-for by the Jews.
- The rules of political correctness towards Israel seem to partially disappear in Germany; the case of Grass confirms it.
- In the 'background' of the Grass dispute there appear certain figures and shadows of the debate over the uniqueness and special nature of the Holocaust. As a result, the debate in the foreground becomes more than personal. The recent statements of President Joachim Gauck, regarding the debate over the Holocaust, document the selective nature of the evoked historical memory.

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