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Nausea, 'the seal of true love'? Günter Grass' Many Uses of Disgust in *Die Blechtrommel*

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Abstract

At the core of Günter Grass' literary work lies a marked interest for elements normally thought of as unpleasant, vile, and nauseating. Part of the fascination of his books lies precisely in the possibility of observing the world from a different point of view, that is to say, from a crooked perspective which defies mainstream taste. *Die Blechtrommel* (first published in 1959) offers a good example of this tendency: Oskar's decision to remain in a state of extended childhood can be associated with a Freudian reflection on the human psyche, more specifically with the idea of the child as 'polymorphic pervert', indifferent to or even fond of things which adults are bound to find disgusting. The use of the grotesque in Grass' work is strictly linked to dietary elements, such as: the canned fish Oskar's mother gulps down in order to kill herself, the insistence on entrails, the recurring use of figures of speech regarding food. Through Grass' work, the idea of 'disgust' thus becomes a useful tool for investigating contemporary scenarios in the relationships humans establish with each other and with their history.[1]

Keywords: Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, disgust, food in literature.

The use of 'disgust' as a category in order to analyse a literary work may at first glance seem out of place. Nonetheless, this 'strong sensation' (Menninghaus 2003) is a fundamental constituent of our everyday life; it reveals a lot about our ways of being. Perhaps the most interesting thing in disgust lies in its illusory viscerality: it seems fully 'natural', because it springs out from the depths of our body. The impulse to vomit, the first and most striking reaction to repugnance, seemingly comes from our phylogenetic history, from 'genuine' tendencies inscribed in our flesh; and yet it marks our irreparable exclusion from the Eden of nature and animality. As far as we know, no other animal reacts to external stimuli by

[1] This article is based on a paper presented by the author at *Disgust*, the eighth *Skepsi* conference held at the University of Kent, 29–30 May 2015. The author wishes to thank Harriet Clements for her careful editing of the article, in particular her invaluable thematic suggestions and stylistic corrections.

vomiting; when an animal vomits, it is not as a reaction to that abrupt sensation of loathing, that unavoidable desire to distance oneself from an object, a situation or an image, which we call disgust. The latter can be seen as a 'protective mechanism' helping us 'to ensure the safety of the organism by inhibiting contact with what is foul, toxic and thereby dangerous' (Korsmeyer & Smith 2004: 1); but this delimitation is too weak. A deep cultural component is also evident: for example, people of different groups are disgusted by different things. We find the most striking examples in the culinary area. Some things, which in one place are considered *Delikatessen*, elsewhere are taken for emetics; the flesh of some animals, like dogs and horses, is delicious to some people and revolting to others.

On the other hand, there are things which are universally considered disgusting, putrefaction, for example. Indeed, we could broadly say that the aversion arises from anything associated with decay and physical death. Furthermore, everything that comes directly from the body is disgusting, particularly anything smelling like rot from the body's interior: vomit, faeces, urine, secretions like saliva, sweat and mucus, blood (in particular menstrual fluid), and semen. Anything whose smell links it to putrefaction, such as offal and certain cheeses, can be added to this list, as can also whatever distantly recalls it, such swarms of worms, insects, spiders, snakes, and, finally, mice, perhaps because of our atavistic fear they could exhaust our food stockpiles or irreparably taint them. It's important to notice that these things were considered revolting even before science provided proof of the epidemiological danger related to them. This connection with decay is also likely to be the reason of the loathing caused by some kinds of ugliness and deformity, recalling the contortions of suffering and death.

Morality is another slippery and opaque field; here the cultural components play an even more important role. Carolyn Korsmeyer writes: 'often the language of disgust is applied to moral situations to indicate emphatic disapproval in a manner that is more metaphorical than literal' (2011: 4). A specific behaviour is equated via metaphor with something revolting, and, in turn, it becomes revolting. This 'metaphorical manner' is evident in the set of problems still connected with the sexual sphere: nudity, explicit sex scenes or homosexuality are typical contexts which, even today, create forms of 'moral disgust'. The body plays a central role here, with its secretions and its physicality. It's no coincidence that many political campaigns against homosexuality use arguments linked to the 'dangerous' exchange of physical fluids, ignoring the fact heterosexual intercourse is not free from this 'danger', as Martha Nussbaum observes in her chapter 'The Politics of Disgust: Practice, Theory, History' in which she discusses Paul Cameron's obsession with the disgusting in his published material on (principally male)

homosexuality (Nussbaum 2010: 1–30; chapter 1).[2] After all, the political fight against other races, ethnicities or groups is also often based on the possibilities of contagion of the 'pure' social body by the extraneous germs conveyed (or constituted!) by Jews, blacks, foreigners, and *Untermenschen* in general.

In the field of morality, abjection is often connected with taboo infringement; incest was considered disgusting by most cultures long before evidence of hereditary diseases and abnormalities was found. Disgust is certainly one medium by which taboos have been fixedly set in culture. To declare an object taboo – the totem animal, or the king, or the next of kin – means creating a *cordon sanitaire* that prevents anyone from getting close to it. It is not rooted in its actual and immediate dangerousness but in cultural and social reasons (see for example Wolf, Durham 2004). The most interesting thing here is the role played by the body: the prohibition connected with taboo has its roots in the body's inner parts; disgust, with its immediate and visceral reactions, is one of the most effective mechanisms whereby to prevent individuals from trespassing the thresholds the taboo protects.

This brief and largely incomplete overview of the idea of disgust (see further Kolnai 1998, 2004; Menninghaus 1999; Korsmeyer 2011; Nussbaum 2004, 2010; McGinn 2011) can be useful as a basis for reflection on the novel *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*), published by Günter Grass in 1959 (Grass 1974, 1998).[3] Disgust plays a major role in the novel; nevertheless, critics have overlooked it, surely because of the overwhelming variety of narrative themes and images. It is a very interesting exercise, especially from an historical perspective. Many things were considered disgusting by his contemporaries at the time of its publication, especially its 'pornographic' moments, in respect of which legal action was taken against Grass (see Neuhaus 1997); today the same passages make us smile, when we compare them with the many 'Shades of Grey' (with acknowledgements to James (2011)) permeating, so they say, our present culture. All the same, many scenes in the novel remain 'genuinely' disgusting. In the pages that follow I shall reflect upon them, in order to analyse the way Grass uses this 'strong sensation' as a lens through which to view the world around Oskar Matzerath.

1. The unpleasant, vile and nauseating: Disgust in Grass' work

At the core of Günter Grass' literary work there lies a marked interest for elements normally thought of as unpleasant, vile, and nauseating. Part of his books' fascination resides precisely

[2] Nussbaum quotes the American Sociological Association as having written that 'Dr. Cameron has consistently misinterpreted and misrepresented research on sexuality, homosexuality, and lesbianism' (Nussbaum 2010: 6).
[3] This work and its English translation will from now on be cited respectively '*DB*' and '*TTD*'.

in the possibility of observing the world from a different point of view; that is to say, from a distorted perspective which defies mainstream *taste*. The protagonists of *The Tin Drum* and *Katz und Maus* (*Cat and Mouse*; Grass 1983, 1978b), Oskar and Mahlke, are physically misshapen; their contemporaries find this deformity slightly repelling, as do readers, and it operates as a filter, permitting them to see major malformations in the social body. In the novel *Der Butt* (*The Flounder* Grass 1977, 1978a), the ugliness of the flounder, embodied in its crooked mouth, serves to overturn the traditional perspective and to shed doubt on progress and the force leading it, be that force God or the Hegelian '*Weltgeist*', as positive elements in the human history. The first person narrator of the novel has a predilection for foods often thought of as revolting, like tripe and other offal. On the one hand, this conforms to the image of blustering virility adopted as a counter to the 'Feminal', the feminist tribunal which puts the flounder on trial; on the other, it seems a wholesome form of nonconformity, a refusal to comply with fashionable trends of fast-food or vegetarianism.

There are, then, more meals, subtly differentiated, that are revolting in Grass' work. The children in Oskar's court compel him to gulp down a horrid concoction, in a scene with ironic Faustian undertones, as we will see later on. He feels obliged to eat the repulsive spaghetti offered by Klepp; this act, although revolting, marks the beginning of a friendship which enables him to overcome his disgust. In the novel *Hundejahre* (*The Dog Years*), Tulla shares meat and offal with the German Shepherd dog Harras during the seven days she spends in its kennel after her brother Konrad's death (Grass 1963: 177–87; 1969: 198–209). This genuine lack of fussiness is characteristic of the girl's vitality. An example is given by the unforgettable scene of *Katz und Maus* when Tulla plays around with the semen expelled by the boys on the minesweeper:

> Als das Zeug endlich kam und auf den Rost klatschte, begann sie erst richtig zappelig zu werden, warf sich auf den Bauch, machte enge Rattenaugen, guckte guckte, wollte ichweißnichtwas entdecken, hockte wieder, ging auf die Knie, stand leicht x-beinig darüber und begann mit beweglichen großen Zeh zu rühren, bis es rostrot schäumte: 'Mensch, prima! Mach du jetzt mal, Atze!' (Grass 1983: 26)
>
> [*But when, finally, the stuff came and splashed on the rust, she would begin to fidget and squirm, she would throw herself down on her belly, make little rat's eyes and look and look, trying to discover heaven-knows-what, turn over, sit up, rise to her knees and her feet, stand slightly knock-kneed over the mess, and begin to stir it with a supple big toe, until it foamed rust-red: "Boy! That's the berries! Now you do it, Atze."* (Grass 1978a: 29)]

Although not being misshapen, the narrator plays with her typical ugliness: Tulla is 'ein Spirkel mit Strichbeinen [*a spindly little thing with legs like toothpicks*]' and her face can be drawn 'mit einem Punkt Komma Strich [*with the most common punctuation marks*]' (Grass 1983: 25; 1978b: 29). She arouses her mate's interest only because of her sexual availability;

in this way, she put herself in the zone of the 'morally contentious' and 'disgusting', for her milieu. Both Tulla and Oskar demonstrate a deep lack of interest in the people surrounding them, a particular form of amorality found in many of Grass' characters; Tulla, for example, remains the same in the novella *Im Krebsgang* (*Crabwalk*) (Grass 2002a; 2002b), with her beliefs, at the same time firm and inconsistent.

Disgust also plays, albeit less obviously, an important role in *Im Krebsgang*. Again, it is an intellectual or moral disgust, rather than disgust for something seen, tasted or felt; another example of this is to be found in *Die Blechtrommel*, as shall be seen. Tulla's nostalgic reminiscences about particular aspects of her childhood and years as a teenager in Nazi Danzig with which she regales Konrad, her grandson, arouses his curiosity, with the result that he becomes radicalised by the ethos of the Neo-Nazis. Throughout the novella, it has become increasingly clear, although never expressly stated, that Paul, Konrad's father and Tulla's son, finds the ethos of the Neo-Nazis abhorrent; indeed, the moment when Paul realises that his son embraces those very political views that he, Paul, finds repellent is arguably the novella's *Wendepunkt* (Grass 2002a: 73; 2002b: 75). However, the irresolute Paul, who embodies the fragility of post-war West German society, is unable to transform this disgust into a source of positive values for Konrad.

We can add here another category of moral disgust, linked to all behaviours violating the elementary norms of inter-human partnership. Tulla and Oskar have kin, to be found in world literature: Characters like Fedor, one of the eponymous brothers in Dostoevsky's 1882 novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, who is not a sadist but totally indifferent toward his peers (2002), Jean-Baptiste Grenouille in Süskind's novel *Das Parfum* (1985), or Patrick Bateman in Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991). More than cruelty or reprehensible behaviours, what is repugnant and contemptible in them is their self-exclusion from society and from its rituals of compromise. This doesn't come from some kind of higher law but is simply the consequence of an enormous self-centeredness which inhibits every form of empathy with other human beings. This is an important starting point from which to analyse *The Tin Drum*. As a first person narrator, the completely self-centred Oskar drives the ways of reading the novel. It begins from the very first line, with the dwarf playing with his own unreliability: 'Zugegeben: ich bin Insasse einer Heil- und Pflegeanstalt [*Granted: I am an inmate of a mental hospital*]' (*DB*: 9; *TTD*: 1). Grass' narrator immediately lets the reader know that the whole narration is filtered through his eyes, the eyes of a man whose mental illness is at least alleged; on more than one occasion he confesses he is 'unreliable, vacilating, untruthful, and a teller of fantastic,

largely unsubstantiated events' (Beyersdorf 1980: 138; see also Arker 1989: 101–03; Jahnke/Lindemann 1993: 9–18; Robertson 1996: 64–70). Grass plays with these possibilities. typical of the picaresque novel: whoever lives by means of expediency and fraud can't be seen as trustworthy when he narrates his life. Oskar's perspective has, furthermore, a spatial characteristic: a dwarf can only see the world from a bottom-up perspective. The subsequent deformation of the ordinary vision line affects the reader, too; this major tool permits a radical *Verfremdung*.

This defamiliarisation is made more acute by the way Oskar troubles those around him by choosing, at the age of three, to stop growing and let his family think that he suffers from intellectual inadequacy. One of the main reasons for this choice is his determination to behave solely according to his own desires without any consideration for those of other people. In this way, the dwarf avoids all responsibility as regards the world around him, a trait Oskar shares with many of Grass' other male characters, such as the first person narrators of *The Flounder* and *Crabwalk* both of whom, just like the dwarf, desire 'die Rückkehr zur Nabelschnur [*to get back to the umbilical cord*]' (*DB*: 144; *TTD*: 163). While the adult narrators must ceaselessly make compromises with the women, and the reality, surrounding them, Oskar places himself in radical opposition to the adults and their ability for mutual adaptation; he uses his decision to remain a child, not conforming to the norms of 'civilization' in order to maintain his uncanny distance from the events he recounts. The reader never understands either his basic assumptions or the extent to which he is involved in the suffering around him, suffering such as the many deaths — of Agnes, his mother, Matzerath and Bronski, his two fathers, Roswitha, and Sister Dorothea —, or if he really suffers from these losses at all.

It is important to highlight that this is not a protest in the name of the slogan, which was to become the mainstream slogan of student movements some years later, 'Väter sind Täter [*fathers are perpetrators*]'. Nor is it the decision to remain innocent and untouched by the Nazi atmosphere. Oskar goes against the adult society's norms only because of his limitless egotism. This radical opposition is added to another form of rejection, even subtler and more uncanny, of life in general. Indeed, he appears to be frightened by life. His attempts to kill the child growing in Maria's womb, supposedly his brother, but who may in fact be his son, are obviously driven by jealousy, but he chooses remarkably interesting words when he says: '[Ich] verließ […] unser Wohnzimmer, das mir angesichts eines raumfüllenden Leibes zu eng geworden war [[*I*] *left our living room, which in view of that space-filling abdomen had become too small for me*]' (*DB*: 245; *TTD*: 280). Behind Grass' narration lies a sort of anguish before this 'double

bind' situation: on the one hand, a painful consciousness associated with the adult world and, on the other, a horrifying and indifferent nature, a bare life. The unstable solution appears to be the closest thing possible to the nirvanic refuge of the maternal womb.

2. Disgust in *The Tin Drum*: eels, vomit and corpses

The Tin Drum has never been the object of an extensive analysis with psychoanalytical tools. Freudian elements are probably far too evident and openly declared to consecrate specific studies to them. Oskar has, for example, a manifest Oedipal complex, redoubled by the presence of two father-rivals, Matzerath and Bronski. Incidentally, he is successful in killing them both, though not in marrying his mother Agnes, one of the most sensitive and human characters invented by Grass; nevertheless, he finds a substitute for her in Alfred's second wife, Maria. His decision to continue to live in a state of extended childhood is a clear form of regression. Moreover, there are plenty of phallic items in the novel, summed up by Oskar's 'new found friend' Gottfried von Villar close to the end of the novel: 'Trommelstock, Narbe, Patronenhülse, Ringfinger [*drumstick, scar, cartridge case, ring finger*]' (*DB*: 474; *TTD*: 544). These are 'objective correlatives' (Neuhaus 2010: 73) recalling the sticks of Oskar's drum, the scars on Herbert Truczinski's back, the cartridge case connected with Jan Bronski's death, and sister Dorothea's ring finger, which Oskar claims to have in his possession. The same friend goes on to note: 'ein aufgeschlossener Mensch [müßte] die Folge […] müehlos begreifen [*A man of discernment could not fail to see through* [*this*] *sequence*]' (*DB*: 474; *TTD*: 544). Although not cited, other obvious phallic references include his 'eleventh finger' (*DB*: 229; *TTD*: 261) and little Jesus' 'watering can' (*DB*: 114; *TTD*: 126). The same can be said for the eels of the most famous, and perhaps the most disgusting, episode in the novel. Given its importance to the work, it is worth looking more closely at the scene.

On Good Friday, Oskar and his 'holy family' (*TTD*: 132)[4] that is, his parents and Jan Bronski, his mother's cousin and lover, and quite possibly Oskar's father, take a trip to the Baltic seaside. Here they meet an old longshoreman fishing for eels with a horse's head: 'ein[] Pferdekopf, ein[] frische[r], wie echte[r] Pferdekopf […], faul war der Kopf nicht, stank nicht [*A fresh and genuine horse's head* […]. *The head was not putrid, it didn't stink*]' (*DB*: 120; *TTD*: 134). 'Small light-green eels' dart furiously from it.

> Es gelang dem Stauer […] vielleicht zwei Dutzend kleinere Aale in den Sack zu stopfen, den Matzerath hilfsbereit, wie er sich gerne gab, hielt. So konnte er auch nicht sehen, daß Mama käsig im Gesicht wurde […]. Aber als die kleinen und mittleren Aale im Sack waren und der

[4] Although very funny and perfectly appropriate, there is no trace of this religious allusion in the original German version.

> Stauer […] anfing, dickere, dunkle Aale aus dem Kadaver zu würgen, da mußte Mama sich setzen, und Jan wollte ihr den Kopf weg drehen, aber das ließ sie nicht zu, starrte unentwegt mit dicken Kuhaugen mitten hinein in das Würmerziehen des Stauers. […] [Er] riß, mit dem Wasserstiefel nahchelfend, dem Gaul das Maul auf, zwängte einen Knüppel zwischen die Kiefer, so daß der Eindruck entstand: das vollständige gelbe Pferdegebiß lacht. Und als der Stauer […] mit beiden Händen hineingriff in den Rachen des Gaules und gleich zwei auf einmal herausholte, die mindestens armdick waren und armlang, da riß es auch meiner Mama das Gebiß auseinander; das ganze Frühstück warf sie, klumpiges Eiweiß und Fäden ziehendes Eigelb zwischen Weißbrotklumpen im Milchkaffeeguß über die Molensteine, und würgte immer noch, aber es kam nichts mehr. […] Nichts außer grünlichem Schleim kam – und die Möwen kamen. Kamen schon, als sie anfing zu spucken, kreisten tiefer, ließen sich fett und glatt fallen, schlugen sich um das Frühstück meiner Mama […]. Als der Stauer fast fertig war und zum Abschluß dem Gaul einen mächtigen Aal aus dem Ohr zog, mit dem Aal die ganze weiße Grütze aus dem Hirn des Gaules sabbern ließ, da stand zwar gleichfalls dem Matzerath der Käse im Gesicht, aber die Angeberei gab er dennoch nicht auf […] (*DB*: 122–23).

> [*The longshoreman* […] *managed to cram a couple of dozen small eels into the sack which Matzerath, who liked to be helpful, held ready for him. Matzerath was too busy to see Mama turn green.* […] *But when the small and the medium-sized eels were in the sack and the longshoreman* […] *began to squeeze thicker, dark colored eels out of the cadaver, Mama had to sit down. Jan tried to turn her head away, but Mama would not allow it; she kept staring with great cow's eyes into the very middle of the longshoreman's activity*. […] *With the help of his rubber boot he wrenched the horse's mouth open and forced a club between the jaws, so that the great yellow horse teeth seemed to be laughing. And when the longshoreman* […] *reached both hands into the horse's gullet and pulled out two at once, both of them as thick and long as a man's arm, my mother's jaws were also torn asunder: she disgorged her whole breakfast, pouring out lumpy egg white and threads of egg yolk mingled with lumps of bread soaked in* café au lait *over the stones of the breakwater. After that she retched but there was nothing more to come out.* […] *Nothing came but green mucus, but the gulls came. They were already in their way when she began to vomit, they circled lower, they dropped down sleek and smooth*; […] *they fought over my Mama's breakfast.* […] *When in conclusion* [*the longshoreman*] *extracted an enormous eel from the horse's ear, followed by a mess of white porridge from the horse's brain, Matzerath himself was green about the gills but went right on with his act* (*TTD*: 135–36).

This passage is particularly complicated, as the disgust which it engenders emerges from different complementary elements, which Grass has cleverly intertwined. We have some clearly disgusting factors, like the decaying horse carrion, Agnes' vomit, the 'white porridge of the horse's brain', the 'long, viscous train of tobacco juice' spat by the longshoreman (*DB*: 120; *TTD*: 133), his rummaging in the horse's head; moreover, Grass uses some *Verfremdungseffekte* in order to make the sensation of disgust sharper. What is essential here is the way the atmosphere abruptly changes as the family's enjoyment of an idyllic Good Friday turns to revulsion at the repugnant sight. The reader is forced to share the feelings of Agnes and Jan, while the attitude of the others acts a prism, intensifying the discomfort engendered by the spectacle. One's first impression of the longshoreman is that of someone who's lazy and apparently good natured. In stark contrast, the phlegmatic way in which he fishes for eels with the horse's head gives him the gloss of something evil and, above all, inhuman; it is hard to discern an equal, another human being, in someone who does not appear to share our disgust for something. Matzerath wants to appear unmoved, but he wavers when confronted with the longshoreman's *crescendo* of actions, while Oskar maintains his usual nonchalance. In the

background we have the animals, the seagulls and the eels, which are 'naturally' unemotional but nevertheless no less uncanny in their attraction for disgusting elements, like the horse's carrion, Agnes' vomit and the sputum of the longshoreman.

On another level, there is an implicit reference in this construction of disgust to one of culture's most evident boundaries, a self-deception which allows us to feed ourselves: the faculty to forget whence comes the food we eat, particularly animal meat, which is so like human flesh. Culinary preparations, as Lévi-Strauss frequently observes throughout his work (1970), are also ways to conceal the origin of foods, to distance ourselves from the idea of being similar to the other animals. Matzerath and the longshoreman talk, for example, about the rather cruel method used to prepare eels before smoking them: they wriggle themselves to death in the salt, and the salt draws the slime from their skin and innards. This practice is forbidden by the police, but the longshoreman believes there is no alternative: 'Wie sollte man sonst auch den Schleim ohne Salz von den Aalen herunter und von innen heraus bekommen [*How else are you going to get the slime out of your eels?*]' (*DB*: 122; *TTD*: 136). Eels and seagulls have the same appetites as human beings, but the latter found refined ways with which to satisfy them, ways which definitely separate mankind from the rest of the animal world. Disgust, *en passant*, functions as a signal we give each other, in order to note our distance from animality.

Later on, the longshoreman makes an even more surprising comment about the eels: 'Und in menschliche Leiche gehen sie auch […]. Besonders nach der Seeschlacht am Skagerrak sollen die Aale mächtig fett gewesen sein [*And* [*they crawl*] *into human corpses, too* […] *They say the eels were mighty fat after the battle of the Skagerrak*]' (*DB*: 122; *TTD*: 137). The reference to cannibalism, although through a third party, adds another repugnant element to the scene, touching upon one more taboo (see Eckhardt 1999). Even more interesting is the reference to the war, which unexpectedly broadens the perspective. What disgusts us is not only, or not principally, the natural circumstance of eels devouring corpses nor the fact that these eels could then be eaten by human beings but also the fact that the longshoreman appears not to consider the totally unnatural circumstance of war, with all its carnage and suffering, abnormal and disgusting.

The narrative thread of disgust continues. Matzerath, who is a passionate cook, buys some eels and wants to prepare them for lunch. His wife refuses to eat them, saying: 'Überhaupt kein Fisch eß ich mehr, und Aale schon ganz und gar nicht [*I'll never touch fish again as long as I live and certainly not an eel*]' (*DB*: 123; *TTD*: 138). There follows a funny scene, in which Matzerath, who is a good-natured man and very kind to his wife, asks Jan to calm Oskar's

mother, who is lying on the chaise-longue, and Jan does the job with much whispering 'auf kaschubisch' [*in Kashubian*] and hands under her skirt;[5] hidden in the cupboard, Oskar watches the scene. Everything seems to end well with a game of Skat, but some weeks later the mother, 'von rätselhaftem Willen besessen [*possessed by some mysterious demon*]' (*DB*: 129; *TTD*: 144), begins to devour enormous quantities of fish. It is not her husband who forces her to start eating fish again; in fact, he is sincerely worried about her behaviour.

> [S]ie begann mit Ölsardinen zum Frühstück, fiel zwei Stunden später […] über das Sperrholzkästchen mit den Bohnsacker Sprotten her, verlangte zum Mittagessen gebratene Flundern oder Pomuchel in Senfsoße, hatte am Nachmittag schon wieder den Büchsenöffner in der Hand: Aal in Gelee, Rollmöpse, Bratheringe, und wenn Matzerath sich weigerte, zum Abendbrot wieder Fisch zu braten oder zu kochen, dann verlor sie kein Wort, schimpfte nicht, stand ruhig vom Tisch auf und kam mit einem Stück geräucherten Aal aus dem Laden zurück, daß uns der Appetit verging, weil sie mit dem Messer der Aalhaut innen und außen das letzte Fett abschabte, und überhaupt nur noch Fisch mit dem Messer aß. Tagsüber mußte sie sich mehrmals übergeben. […] [Mama] führte den Aal durch die Maibutter und aß unentwegt, als hätte sie eine Fleißaufgabe zu erfüllen. […] Wenige Tage später sah ich, wie sie in der Küche nicht nur über die gewohnten, verdammten Ölsardinen herfiel, sie goß auch das Öl aus mehreren älteren Dosen, die sie aufbewahrt hatte, in eine kleine Soßenpfanne, erhitzte die Brühe über die Gasflamme und trank davon […]. Noch am selben Abend mußte Mama in die städtischen Krankenanstalten eingeliefert werden. […] Es sollte sich herausstellen, daß Mama weder die Mole noch den Pferdekopf vergessen hatte, daß die Erinnerung an den Gaul […] mit sich nahm. Ihre Organe erinnerten sich schmerzhaft überdeutlich an den Karfreitagsspaziergang und ließen, aus Angst von Wiederholung des Spazierganges, meine Mama, die mit ihren Organen einer Meinung war, sterben (*DB*: 129–30).
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> [*She started in at breakfast on canned sardines, two hours later* […] *she would dig into a case of Bohnsack sprats, for lunch she would demand fired flounder or codfish with mustard sauce, and in the afternoon there she was again with her can opener: eels in jelly, rollmops, baked herring, and if Matzerath refused to fry or boil more fish for supper, she would waste no breath in arguing, but would quietly leave the table and come back from the shop with a chunk of smoked eel. For the rest of us it was the end of our appetites, because she would scrape the last particle of fat from the inside and outside of the eel's skin with a knife* […]. *She would have to vomit at intervals throughout the day*. […] *Mama* [*pushed*] *the potatoes aside, pulled out an eel through the sauce, and set to with relentless determination.* […] *A few days later, I saw her in the kitchen as she* […] *poured out the oil from several cans she had been saving up into a little saucepan, heated it over the gas, and drank it down* […] *The same evening Mama was taken to the city hospital*. […] *It soon turned out that Mama had forgotten neither the breakwater nor the horse's head, that she had carried the memory of that horse* […] *along with her. Every organ in her body stored up the bitter memory of that Good Friday excursion and for fear to be repeated, her organs saw to it that my mama, who was quite in agreement with them, should die* (*TTD*: 144–46).]

Eating fish is clearly her way of committing suicide. The final part of the quotation supports our hypothesis of Freudian echoes in the novel; she suffers from a compulsion to repeat. The eel episode is a kind of trauma for Agnes, something difficult for her to articulate (i.e. to digest), and it is very interesting that Grass chooses such a visceral complex of images with which to talk about her death. The aversive effect provoked by the horse's head has its counterpart in the

[5] Both Agnes and her cousin are Kashubs, an ethnic group still found in parts of Poland with its own language; in fact Günter Grass' mother was of Kashubian-Polish origin. The implication is that, by whispering in Kashub, they will not be understood by Matzerath.

way Agnes decides to kill herself: she turns disgust into a self-poisoning effect, and she uses her slight eating disorder, cited by Oskar during the eel episode (*DB*: 121; *TTD*: 135), as a weapon against herself, destroying at the same time her 'schlanke[] Seele' and her 'üppigen Körper [*slender soul and ample body*]' (*DB*: 173; *TTD*: 195).

We don't exactly know what her reasons are for committing suicide, or where exactly her despair lies. She has a complicated relationship with a husband and a lover, and she is pregnant again, too. However, this situation is not, at this first glance, even remotely desperate; as Oscar recounts it, the three have reached quite an enviable balance. Maybe the mother's failed happiness lies, on the one hand, in her fears about her new pregnancy; it is clear that the dwarf is a thorn in the flesh for his mother. On the other hand, it may lie in the inadequacy of the men around her. Jan's melancholic, slightly effeminate delicacy, which harmonises with Agnes' personality, clashes with Matzerath's good-natured and jovial virility, which is likely to satisfy the woman's other needs. It's interesting to notice that, apart from the woman's death, what harms the friendship between the two men is Hitlerian nationalism, which finally makes the friendship impossible (see *DB*: 172; *TTD*: 196). Something similar happens to Meyn, the trumpet player living in Oskar's apartment block, who is nice until the moment he joins the SA. Nazism in the novel is seen as a distortion of civilization, corrupting human relationships on the basis of non-values like nation, race, and orderliness. When Meyn is drunk, he plays the trumpet marvellously and lives, with four stinking cats, in insanitary conditions. The SA-uniform forces him to remain sober, to stop playing and to kill the cats, whose bad smell he suddenly finds intolerable. Oskar narrates this cruel episode in the chapter 'Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe [*Faith, Hope, Love*]' (*DB*: 159–68; *TTD*: 181–90), and describes it in parallel with *Kristallnacht* or the Night of Broken Glass, in an intense and defamiliarising way.

One cannot but find the words Matzareth uses in the face of his wife's desperation extremely moving: 'Warum willste das Kind denn nich? Is ja gleich, von wem es is [*Why don't you want the child? What does it matter whose it is?*]' (*DB*: 129; *TTD*: 144). This character is drawn in such a way as to give the impression that Matzerath is a nice person. In no way can he be considered a victim; he is a quiet man, who likes to laugh, to sing, and to cook. His lack of jealousy as regards Agnes and her cousin stems from neither indifference nor a lack of tenderness towards his wife; indeed, the very opposite is true. He feels a great tenderness toward Oskar, despite the distance from both him and the world that the dwarf stubbornly maintains, and resists the idea of sending his son into a centre for euthanasia with rage (*DB*: 298; *TTD*: 342–43). And yet Matzereth joins the Nazis early on, and appears to be an enthusiastic supporter

of the movement, a 'Mitläufer', although, as far as we know, he doesn't play an active role in inflicting violence against Jews (for example, during the Night of Broken Glass). During the eel episode, Oskar tells us that his entry into the party corresponds with 'the way he was':

> Aber das war so seine Angewohnheit, immer zu winken, wenn andere winkten, immer zu schreien, zu lachen und zu klatschen, wenn andere schrien, lachten oder klatschten. Deshalb ist er verhältnismäßig früh in die Partei eingetreten, als das noch gar nicht nötig war, nichts einbrachte und nur seine Sonntagsvormittage beanspruchte (*DB*: 122–23).
>
> [*He always had to wave when other people were waving, to shout, laugh and clap when other people were shouting, laughing and clapping. That explains why he joined the party at a relatively early date, when it was quite unnecessary, brought no benefits, and just wasted his Sunday mornings* (*TTD*: 137).]

He is an average man, a product of the petty bourgeoisie. The sympathy he arouses might be the most revolting thing in the novel, because it reminds the reader that Nazis were mostly very 'normal' people.

3. Fetishes and complexes: Oskar on the psychoanalyst's couch

To return to psychoanalysis, it is evident that the narrative is built around many elements which represent the maternal uterus. The first symbol is surely Oskar's grandmother's 'weiter Rock [*wide skirt*]' (*DB*: 9; *TTD*: 1), where his grandfather Koljaiczek takes shelter at the beginning of the story, and where, with its 'Geruch jener gelblich zerfließenden, leicht ranzigen Butter [*smell of melted yellow, slightly rancid butter*]', Oskar finds lodging many times, as he recalls more than once (*DB*: 136, 272, 289; *TTD*: 153, 312, 331). Also cupboards play a role as symbols: as already mentioned, for example, Oskar takes refuge, in Danzig, in his parents' bedroom wardrobe during the argument immediately after the episode with the eels (*DB*: 125–28; *TTD*: 140–44). This is an interesting passage because the narrative is interrupted by a dreamlike episode, where some themes of the novel resurface, for example Oskar's passion for nurses, who, as caregivers, are clearly substitutes for his mother (see Neuhaus 2010: 75). On the other hand, other themes are evoked here for the first time, for instance the Black Witch, or, in the original German, the 'schwarze Köchin [*the black* [*female*] *cook*]', who embodies all of Oskar's fears.[6]

[6] The name in the original German version recalls an enigmatic German nursery rhyme: 'Ist die schwarze Köchin da? / Nein, nein, nein! / Dreimal muss ich 'rummarschier'n, / das viertemal den Kopf verlier'n,/ das fünftemal: komm mit! / Ist die schwarze Köchin da? / Ja, ja, ja. /Da geht sie ja, da steht sie ja, / die Köchin aus Amerika! [*Is the black cook here? / No, no, no! / Three times have I to march around / the fourth to lose the head / the fifth: now is your turn! Is the black cook here? / Yes, yes, yes! / She goes indeed, she stands indeed, the cook who comes from Tweed!*]' (see Craig 2016). By translating 'die schwarze Köchin' as 'the Black Witch', Ralph Mannheim actually loses an important image, for cooking is very important in Grass' work (see Neuhaus, Weyer, 2007; Schneider 2008).

Some years later, in Düsseldorf, Oskar enters another cupboard, this time in the room occupied by Sister Dorothea, who lives next door to him and who at that moment is away. He has never seen her, but his interest in nurses makes her, in any case, interesting. Oskar furtively enters the room while she is at work, and, after snooping around, he enters the cupboard. Here his goals are even more evident: his entering the cupboard is a sort of penetration, a fetishistic attempt to take the unknown nurse sexually, and, at the same time, a fulfilment of the desire to be contained in a space narrower than the real world, in a womb. In the dark, Oskar relives the episode of the eels, of which he's reminded by, not insignificantly, another item with phallic connotations, a black leather belt hanging in the cupboard **(***DB*: 410–13; *TTD*: 470–73). This is a sort of re-enactment of the trauma, re-narrated with many details, not just a remembering.

Some observations by Winfried Menninghaus could be profitably used in this line of reasoning. Freud shows, suggests Menninghaus in a chapter in his work *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (2003), considerable interest in themes linked to disgust, as he, Menninghaus, understands it. Menninghaus stresses the evident pleasure the psychoanalyst took in imagining the early childhood as a paradisiacal condition devoid of disgust barriers, with their civilising and neuroticising function. The Freudian idea of the child as 'polymorphously perverse', indifferent to or even fond of things which adults are bound to find disgusting, is for our reasoning particularly important. In the *Introductory Lessons on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud highlights the way a child's sexuality differs from 'normal', that is, adult, sexuality; among other things, disgust plays a central role.

> Was wir im Leben der Erwachsenen "pervers" nennen, weicht vom Normalen in folgenden Stücken ab: erstens durch das Hinwegsetzen über die Artschranke (die Kluft zwischen Mensch und Tier), zweitens durch die Überschreitung der Ekelschranke, drittens der Inzestschranke […], viertens der Gleichgeschlechtlichkeit, und fünftens durch die Übertragung der Genitalrolle an andere Organe und Körperstellen. Alle diese Schranken bestehen nicht von Anfang an, sondern werden erst allmählich im Laufe der Entwicklung und der Erziehung aufgebaut. Das kleine Kind ist frei von ihnen (Freud 1969: 213).
>
> [*What in adult life is described as "perverse" differs from the normal in these respects: first, by disregarding the barrier of species (the gulf between men and animals); secondly, by overstepping the barrier of disgust; thirdly, by overstepping the barrier of incest (the prohibition against seeking sexual satisfaction from near blood-relations); fourthly, by disregarding the prohibition against sexual intercourse with members of one's own sex; and, fifthly, by transferring the part played by the genitals to other organs and areas of the body. None of these barriers exist from the beginning; they were only gradually erected in the course of development and education. Small children are free of them* (Freud 1965: 209).]

Oskar's character is surely a very plastic representation of the 'polymorphously perverse' child and, above all, a depiction of the adult who wishes these barriers had never been built. This complex is evidenced by his fetishism (see the episode of Sister Dorothea's cupboard), his homoerotic tendencies, for example when confronted with Little Jesus' 'Gießkännchen

[*watering can*]' (*DB*: 114; *TTD*: 126), his perspective that transcends every issue regarding sexual morality, his incestuous desires, and his particular relation with the 'disgust-barriers'.

Although his narrative always appears emotionally disengaged, the dwarf does sometimes feel repugnance. The first example of this is the episode of the horrid 'soup' the children 'cook' while playing in the courtyard of the block of flats in which Oskar and his family live. They force Oskar to gulp down the brew, which contains three shots of a neighbour's tobacco juice laden spittle, two frogs, a pulverized brick, and the urine of various children. Oskar throws up the soup immediately, 'der Geschmack wird mir bleiben [*the taste will stay with me*]', he says, and the episode makes him feel 'den Drang nach einer Tat [*an urge for action*]' which broadens his glass-destroying horizons and increases his desire to leave the courtyard 'that had grown too small' and its soup-cookers (*DB*: 78; *TTD*: 84). For the first time in the novel, disgust has a gnoseological function.

In a similar vein, a comment made by Oskar is particularly pertinent: when talking about the school and about Schefflers' living room, he says they are 'kaum nach [s]einem Geschmack [*hardly to* [*his*] *liking*]' (*DB*: 74).[7] The cosmopolitan dwarf feels nothing but disgust for '[der] [Schefflers] süß-niedlichen, entzückend gemütlich […] Behausung [*the* [*Scheffler residence*] [*that*]] *was too sweet for words, so cunning and coy*' (*DB*: 70; *TTD*: 74);[8] with its abundance of knickknacks and embroidery, it perfectly embodies the petit bourgeois taste and ideals that his mother also shares (see *DB*: 34; *TTD*: 31). The only difference between the two women, as the dwarf cynically observes, is that Agnes can count on Jan Bronski as a diversion, whereas Gretchen Scheffler has to content herself by knitting; she sublimates by indefatigable housekeeping the need occasioned by her husband's lack of attention and the lack of children. However, the realm of repressed eroticism is revealed through Oskar's choice of *Rasputin and the Women*, a book that is rich in detailed descriptions of the self-styled holy man's complicated love-life, as the principal book from which to learn his ABC. Repression is further illustrated not only by Gretchen's embarrassed titter as they are reading the more explicit passages but also by her practice of plying Oskar with goodies from her husband's bakery, thereby indulging herself. As an antidote to this excess of cakes and pastries, Oskar develops a method, which he describes in great detail:

> Oft wußte ich mir nach allzu süßen Unterrichtsstunden […] nicht anders zu helfen, als daß ich […] ein Stück trockenes Brot an einen Bindfaden band, in das norwegische Fäßchen mit

[7] Author's translation; Manheim translates 'die Schule […] war also kaum nach meinem Geschmack' as 'I had no yearning for the school' (*TTD*: 74).

[8] Author's translation: Manheim translates 'Behausung (dwelling, residence)' as 'place'; this loses the humour of using the term 'Behausung' in the context of the Scheffler's home.

> eingelegten Heringen tunkte und erst herauszog, wenn das Brot von der Salzlauge bis zum Überdruß durchtränkt war. Sie können sich nicht vorstellen, wie nach dem unmäßigen Kuchengenuß dieser Imbiß als Brechmittel wirkte. Oftmals gab Oskar, um abzunehmen, auf unserem Klosett für über einen Danziger Gulden Kuchen aus der Bäckerei Scheffler von sich; das war damals viel Geld (*DB*: 75).
>
> [*After the cloying sweetness of those lessons* […] *I would tie a string around a piece of dry bread, dip the bread in the pickled herring barrel, and remove it only when the bread was saturated with brine. You can't imagine what a blissful emetic that was for one who had eaten too much cake. In the hope of reducing, Oskar would often vomit up a whole Danzig gulden's worth of Scheffler's cake in our toilet. That was a lot of money in those days* (*TTD*: 80).]

4. Smells and tastes: stimuli that disgust and arouse Oskar

The chapter 'Der Stundenplan [The Schedule]' is partly devoted to Oskar's brief experiences with the school. Oskar tells us that his disgust for his classmates is directly related to the effluvia of the slates' sponges, maybe similar to the 'säuerliche Wolken in Satans Achselhölen [*acrid stench in* [*Satan's*] *armpits*]' (*DB*: 70; *TTD*: 74). Sure enough, Oskar is very sensitive to smells. Many characters in the novel are typified through the smell they emit; for example, his grandmother's smell of 'light rancid butter'. Towards the end of the novel, Oskar lists, as he is being chased by Interpol detectives, a sequence of smells 'assailing' him which are linked to moments, more or less important, in his life (*DB*; 488; *TTD*: 561); among others, the sardine oil his mother used to kill herself, the smell of Jan — cologne and 'the smell of early death [that] had seeped through all his buttonholes' — Greff's winter potatoes, Roswitha's cinnamon, the 'Catholic smell' and many others. The first of these smells is 'Maria's youthful vanilla', which Oskar passionately describes when he introduces her character (*DB*: 217; *TTD*: 248). Again, the relationship between them could be read as a sign of an Oedipal complex on Oskar's part: as Matzareth's second wife, Maria is Oskar's surrogate mother. The child unwilling to grow is at, this point, already sixteen years old and considers Maria his first love. She is seventeen and treats the dwarf as a little child; she washes him every evening and is not worried about being seen undressed. The most interesting episode for the purposes of our argument occurs during a trip to the seaside, when Maria is completely nude in a changing room on the beach. 'Frightened [by] her hairy triangle',

> Oskar sprang auf, warf sich Maria zu. Die fing ihn auf mit ihren Haaren. Er ließ sich das Gesicht zuwachsen. Zwischen die Lippen wuchs es ihm. Maria lachte und wollte ihn wegziehen. Ich aber zog immer mehr von ihr in mich hinein, kam dem Vanillegeruch auf die Spur. […] Erst […] als mir die Vanille Tränen in die Augen preßte, als ich schon Pfifferlinge oder sonst was Strenges, nur keine Vanille mehr schmeckte, als dieser Erdgeruch, den Maria hinter der Vanille verbarg, mir den modernden Jan Bronski auf die Stirn nagelte und mich für alle Zeiten mit dem Geschmack der Vergänglichkeit verseuchte, da ließ ich los (*DB*: 220).
>
> [*Oskar jumped up and flung himself on Maria. She caught him with her hair. He buried his face in it. It grew between his lips. Maria laughed and tried to pull him away. I drew more and more of her into me, looking for the source of the vanilla smell.* […] *Only when my feet slipped and I hurt her – for I didn't let go the hair or perhaps it was the air that didn't let me go – only when*

> *the vanilla brought tears to my eyes, only when I began to taste mushrooms or some acrid spice, in any case, something that was not vanilla, only when this earthy smell that Maria concealed behind the vanilla brought me back to the smell of the earth where Jan Bronski lay moldering and contaminated me for all the time with the taste of perishability* (*TTD*: 250-251).]

The dwarf's erotic turmoil illuminates a connection of which Oskar wasn't aware: the connection between love and death, a concept far removed from any romantic sentimentalism. In Oskar's perception, the vague smell of rot in Maria's genitals is directly linked to the fact of Jan's putrefaction, evoked just before, during the trip to the seaside. It's interesting to notice that the dwarf, in the very moment he enters in the adults' world with this first, clumsy, and somehow unintentional sexual act, doesn't think of his mother, already dead at this point in the novel, but of his possible father, whose death he caused. Different impulses are mixed in the awkward cunnilingus: not only sexual ones but also olfactory and alimentary, since Oskar is 'looking for the source of the vanilla smell'. In this episode, disgust again has a gnoseological function: the promise of wellness and happiness linked to the sex act proves to be false when linked to the loss of beloved persons. This is the point where Oskar's uneasy Eden, which enables him to escape from responsibilities by remaining a child, shows its limits. Here he is at liberty to satisfy his erotic desires free of any commitment (with Maria, with Lina Greff), but, at the same time, he is left in an indeterminacy of affections. Being completely self-centred, so unable to connect with anything outside of himself, he cannot feel the warmth of relationships founded on deep love and is therefore condemned to loneliness.

The obsession with Maria's smell continues to underpin the narrative. It's not surprising to find Oskar disturbed by the 'dicksüssige, gelbsüssige […] Vanillesoße [*rich and yellow and viscous vanilla sauce*]' (*DB*: 250; *TTD*: 286) served with the chocolate pudding during the baptism of his brother (or perhaps his son), Kurt. The dwarf finds shelter in the company of another female character, Lina Greff, 'eine [von Jahr zu Jahr] immer übler riechenden Schlampe [*a*[] [*from year to year*] *increasingly foul-smelling sloven*]' (*DB*: 243; *TTD*: 278). Here he breathes her peculiar effluvium:

> [Oskar] genoß zum erstenmal jene, der Lina Greff eigene Ausdünstung, die jede Vanille sofort überschrie, verschluckte, tötete.
> So säuerlich es mich auch ankam, verharrte ich dennoch in der neuen Geruchsrichtung, bis mir alle mit der Vanille zusammenhängenden Erinnerungen betäubt zu sein schienen. Langsam, lautlos und Krampflos überkam mich ein befreiender Brechreiz. […] [Da] begriff ich meine Ohnmacht, schwamm ich in meiner Ohnmacht, breitete sich Oskars Ohnmacht zu Füßen der Lina Greff aus — und ich beschloß, […] meine Ohnmacht zu Frau Greff zu tragen. (*DB*: 250)

> [*For the first time* [*Oskar*] *breathed the effluvium peculiar to Lina Greff, which instantly outshouted, engulfed and killed all Vanilla.*
> *Acrid as it was to my nostrils, I clung to the new perfume until all recollections connected with vanilla sauce seemed to be dulled. Slowly, without the slightest sound or spasm, I was seized with a redeeming impulse to vomit* […]. *I became fully aware of my helplessness, I wallowed in*

> *my helplessness, spread Oskar's helplessness out at the feet of Lina Greff — and decided* […] *to carry my helplessness* […] *to Frau Greff'* (*TTD*: 286).][9]

Oskar's 'helplessness' corresponds to the impossibility of satisfying his desires. The emetic effect doesn't originate from the simple, instinctive, and mechanical reaction of the body confronted with the mixing of the two smells, Maria's delicate vanilla, evoked by the cream and by her presence, and Lina's acrid effluvia; it takes on a gnoseological value, since it allows Oskar to understand the importance of erotic desire in the world he is building. Lina Greff's 'streng sauerliche[r], vielfach gewobene[r] Dunstkreis [*acrid vapors, compounded of multiple effluvia*]' (*DB*: 251; *TTD*: 287) plays a key role here. These 'effluvia', to which the dwarf is indifferent or which may even be an erotic stimulant, are very disturbing for Lina's husband, who, without a word and without so much as a glance at the bed, always brings, together with soap and a towel, a washbasin full of warm water into the room where Oskar has been satisfying his wife, because he can't stand her smell on the dwarf's body, when they meet later (*DB*: 254; *TTD*: 291). The bed in which Lina repeatedly entertains Oskar becomes a terrain for erotic, artistic, and military exercises; so that the dwarf is brought 'zu [einem] breit epischen Atem [[*to a*] *broad epic breath*]' (*DB*: 251; *TTD*: 287). Disgust, eroticism, and art melt together in a productive and dynamic complex.

The incident at Kurt's baptism is recalled during the visit paid to Sister Dorothea's room, some years later. Her brassiere, hanging on a chair, allows Oskar to remember that impulse to vomit and the extreme sweetness of Maria's vanilla smell. Its concavities are

> Schüssel[], die ich tagtäglich, die Kost nicht kennend, gerne ausgelöffelt hätte; ein zeitweiliges Erbrechen schon einbeziehend, denn jeder Brei ist manchmal zum Kotzen, dann wieder Süß hinterher, zu süß oder so süß, daß der Brechreiz Geschmack findet und wahrer Liebe Proben stellt (*DB*: 408).
>
> [*bowls, which in my ignorance of their contents I should gladly have lapped up with a teaspoon day after day; I might have experienced some vomiting now and then, for too much of any fare will unsettle the stomach; but after the impulse to vomit sweetness, such sweetness as to make nausea desirable, the seal of true love* (*TTD*: 469).][10]

Overcoming the disgust seems to be this 'seal of true love'. That can nevertheless be true only in particular situations, as the first encounter with Klepp the jazz flautist shows. Klepp has 'den Geruch einer Leiche an sich, die nicht aufhören kann, Zigaretten zu rauchen, Pfefferminz zu lutschen und Knoblauchdünste auszuscheiden [*the smell of a corpse that never stops smoking cigarettes, sucking peppermints, and eating garlic*]' (*DB*: 416; *TTD*: 479). Oskar is amused by

[9] Author's note: The translation has been slightly adapted; Manheim actually translates 'ein befreiender Brechreiz' as 'a redeeming nausea'.
[10] Author's note: The translation has been slightly adapted; Manheim translates both 'Erbrechen' (vomit/vomiting) and 'Brechreiz' (impulse to vomit) as 'nausea'.

this artist, his very counterpart in individualism, so lazy, that he doesn't get up when he has to urinate and uses the same water to cook spaghetti many times, until it becomes an 'immer sämiger werdende Brühe [*increasingly viscous liquid*]' (*DB*: 418; *TTD*: 480). De-familiarisation emerges here principally from the contrast between the chaotic and dirty scenery — it is hard to imagine a place more different from the petit bourgeois living rooms of Oskar's childhood! —and their dialogue, so courteous it becomes surreal: two tramps treating each other like English lords. Klepp invites the dwarf to eat some spaghetti, cooked in the horrid liquid and in a dirt-encrusted pot. Oskar notices how unpleasant the tableware is; Klepp offers him 'das scheußlichsten aller Teller [*the most loathsome dish I have ever seen*]', just wiped with an old newspaper, together with 'üblem, den Fingern klebendem Besteck [*a spoon and a fork so greasy to my fingers*]' (*DB*: 420; *TTD*: 482). Even Oskar, who can't be defined a fussy person, finds the whole situation repugnant: Klepp's smell, the unhygienic state of the room, the dirt on pot and tableware. But immediately after that, Oskar makes an observation, which is characteristic for the elements I have tried to highlight in the previous pages:

> Bis heute hat Oskar nicht verstehen können, wie er sich damals zum Gebrauch von Löffel und Gabel hat aufraffen können. Wunderbarerweise schmeckte mir das Gericht. Es wurden mir sogar jene Kleppschen Spaghetti zu einem kulinarischen Wertmesser, den ich von jenem Tag an jedem Menu anlegte, das mir vorgesetzt wurde (*DB*: 420).
>
> [*To this day Oskar is at loss to say how he summoned up the courage to ply his fork and his spoon. Strange to say, I enjoyed that spaghetti. In fact, Klepp's spaghetti became for me a culinary ideal, by which from that day on I have measured every menu that is set before me* (*TTD*: 483).]

Disgust again acquires a gnoseological function: through Klepp's spaghetti, Oskar learns to value relationships and not the milieu, overcoming, in this way, the petit bourgeois logic of embroidery and obsessively beaten carpets. In this case, it is not the violence of his playmates that compels him to overcome repugnance but rather the courtesy of his host. This courtesy has nothing to do with hypocritical bourgeois manners; it is not simply another means by which to gain personal profit, to the detriment of the others. The spaghetti eaten with Klepp represents a step forward for Oskar's life and friendships; they become a 'meal of solidarity' (see Wierlacher 1987: 66) where the differences between tablemates are obliterated in favour of a participating, collaborative fraternity.

Conclusion

One last, erratic consideration: although the protest Oskar drums up is fully apolitical (in that he drums against every kind of assembly and trumpeted ideals) and made 'aus privaten, dazu ästhetischen Gründen [*for private and what is more esthetic reasons*]' (*DB*: 100; *TTD*: 109), the novel can be considered, among other things, a sort of accusation against those German

citizens who hung on to their uncanny childhood for twelve years, loving their Führer as a father, but not trying to kill him, and playing with what should have been considered disgusting, like arbitrary acts and violence against the defenceless. An obvious example of this is the fall of Meyn, the trumpeter. As soon as he begins to wear the uniform of the SA, he exchanges his positive attitude towards life for a malign obsession with order and tidiness; as the bad smell of his four cats reminds him of his former way of life, he cruelly feels obliged to kill them. In other words, his disgust is applied toward the wrong object. In this sense, the novel is quite close to the idea of the *Inability to Mourn* demonstrated by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich (1967). The true object of mourning for Germans after the end of the war was the loss of the Führer (and with him the narcissistic illusion of the Ego prominence) and not the conscience of the crimes committed in Hitler's name. According to Grass, the children-Germans were all too willing to take advantage of the situation of enforced minority created by the regime; in this way, they were able to use the shelter of 'natural' infantile blindness as a justification for their lack of disgust towards the regime's crime acts.

Oskar has another idea of childhood, very similar to the idea of humanity. Outstanding in this sense is an observation he made on his first and only school day. The unpleasant teacher drums for a moment with him, relieving herself of her 'vorgeschrieben Existenzkarikatur [[*the*] *prescribed caricature of her livelihood*]'[11]. Oskar is ready to recognise, even in her, a character finally 'menschlich, das heißt, kindlich, neugierig, vielschichtig und unmoralisch [*human, that is, childlike, curious, complex, and immoral*]' (*DB*: 63; *TTD*: 72).

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[11] Author's translation: Manheim translates 'vorgeschrieben Existenzkarikatur' as 'prescribed occupational caricature'.

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