

Narrative Vagueness in Grass's *The Tin Drum*: A Text-Centric Model of Narration to Reveal Dialogized Heteroglossia

Mahmoud Daram¹ & Mojtaba Kharrasi²

¹Corresponding author, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, mdaram2000@yahoo.com

²Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, m.kharrasi@yahoo.com

Received: 27/05/2014

Accepted: 09/10/2014

Abstract

The present study sets out to investigate the narrator's textual position in Grass's *The Tin Drum*. Although authorial self-dramatization through affinities with one or more characters in the work is undeniable, this study mainly concentrates on the inner interpenetrations of heteroglot utterances as uttered by an unreliable first-person narrator, Oskar Matzerath, in the light of the Bakhtinian concepts of carnivalesque and polyphony. Through the evasiveness and irresponsibility of the narrator's act of story-telling, a carnivalesque world is created—a world in which numerous marginalized, unvoiced, and alien utterances interact with the phallogocentric as well as the logocentric forces of the dominant culture. In brief, the present study made use of the notion of narrative vagueness in Grass's *The Tin Drum* to demonstrate the Bakhtinian sociodialectical principle operating through the stratified, heteroglot utterances of other-speechedness, a functional and yet thematic principle working through the tempospacial, chronotopic nature of languages.

Keywords: Carnavalesque; Heteroglossia; Narrative Vagueness; Phallogocentrism; Polyphony; Text; *The Tin Drum*

1. Introduction

In this study, the apocryphal¹ narration of Oskar Matzerath, the protagonist in Grass's *The Tin Drum*, has been analyzed to show the possibility of the Bakhtinian heteroglossia (i.e., other-speechedness) in a network of hierarchical relations, where different marginalized utterances, through the gaps and absences in the narrative, are allowed to interact with, and even counteract, the centripetal forces of authoritarian logos. Moreover, as a result of such dialogized heteroglossia, the meaning of a text can obviously transcend the limitations of an autobiographical author,² who is, according to Derrida (1966, p. 356), caught ultimately in a destructive circle of denunciation because his authorship is "taken from a syntax and a system, every particular borrowing drags along with it the whole of metaphysics." With regard to *The Tin Drum*, however, in order to give more power to the narrator, the author of *The Tin Drum* has deliberately managed to distance himself from the language of his own work, whereas, at the same time, he has maintained his constant

presence. Braun (2008) has suggested that, “Grass is both everywhere and nowhere in his text, not least because it feeds off a tension that is fundamental not only to contemporary debates about literature and the world, but also to his own self-conception as an author functioning in the public sphere” (pp. 30-31). In this context, *The Tin Drum* can be considered as an example of what Bakhtin (1981) denominates as “stratification of languages.” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 271) That is, the inner stratification and layering of the novelistic voices and languages—as comprised of the voice of the author, that of the narrator, and those of various characters—may result in the appearance of the heteroglossia in the novel. At the level of the narrator’s utterances, on the other hand, it seems that a variety of marginalized, alien, other forces coexist with the overshadowing forces of monologic utterance, all in a process of inner interpenetrations. As posited by Mikhail Bakhtin, “the centripetal forces of the life of language, embodied in a unitary language, operate in the midst of heteroglossia” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 270).

Through a first-person narrator, *The Tin Drum* provides a complex set of dialogue of languages, where the elements of grotesque, fairytale and myth, as well as the secondary characters’ narratives are engaged in serious dialogue with the patriarchal, orthodox utterances. The aim of the present study is, thus, to reveal various mechanisms and meaningful implications of the narrative’s dialogical interactions as demonstrated by the different layers of meaning within the narrator’s multivoiced verbal expressions and utterances.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the text as a heteroglot context in terms of the unreliable first-person narrator’s equivocal and irresponsible utterances. Section 3 argues as how Oskar’s mocking attitude towards the world, through words, results in the appearance of polyphony and carnivalesque.

2. Text as Context: Heteroglossia Through the Narrator’s Vague Utterances

Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject is a dialogized intersection of centrifugal and centripetal forces. Bakhtin suggests that, “It is a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 271). From the very beginning of the novel, the dwarfish Oskar Matzerath, who proceeds to tell us the story of his life, grabs our attention by the very first word: “Granted: I’m an inmate in a mental institution . . .” (Grass, 1959a, p. 3). Such an utterance notoriously parodies the long-established norms of narrator’s authority and authenticity. This abnormal identity of nonentity of “I,” who may be any other I, warns us of his inextricable connection with abnormality, a first-person narrator who is marginalized by the forces of a powerful monologism, caught within the dichotomy of (in)sane oppositions, and is now ironically allowed the privilege to narrate his story, perhaps history.

Marginalization of the first person narrator's voice within the text and also from the context of the authorial utterance, as evidenced by Oskar's muteness and seemingly infantilism throughout the first two-thirds of the novel, is broken up by his keenness to mock and by his jealousy toward the success of the others. Oskar's narration of the love affair between Alfred, his presumptive father, and Maria Truczinski, for example, reveals the narrator's inner penchant for subverting the phallogocentric authority of the father by negating such a love affair. Although the outside world—by automatically labeling Oskar as a stunted, abnormal, and alien figure (i.e., the process of nomination, interpretable in the light of Foucauldian sociocultural historical critique; Carroll, 2013)³—has castrated and deprived him of a gender role, and therefore, of the possession of any women, not least that of Maria, the text, nevertheless, provides a heteroglot context in the sense that the narrative voice allows Oskar the privilege to make a claim over Maria. He calls her his first true love, and writes his memoirs of the pleasure-giving “fizz powder” episode in defense of his avowed ownership that has been appropriated. More often than not, he asks Maria: “Don't you remember? Please, surely you remember. Fizz powder. Three pfennigs a packet. Just think about: woodruff, raspberry, how beautifully it foamed and fizzed, and that feeling, Maria, that feeling!” (Grass, 1959a, p. 161). Oscar, thus, tries to destroy Alfred's possession of Maria in the outside world by all the forces of his imagination, as manifested and enacted through his textual position as the narrator of the story. He strongly insists on Alfred's incompetency and hence tries to intrude on Alfred's privacy when he finds him laying on top of Maria. As opposed to Oskar's anachronic and synchronic unification of temporal and spatial events throughout his text-centric narration of the world, there exists Alfred's disintegrated, verticality of time and space. With regard to time, while covering Maria, Alfred is ironically obsessed with the clock's strokes as he says, “It's a quarter of” (Grass, 1959a, p. 161). In other words, whereas Alfred is obsessively engrossed with the habitual matrices of his everyday world, Oskar's narration through his dialogic and chronotopic (i.e., tempospatial) imagination enables him to purge himself of the transcendent and to construct a novel concept of time and place, where previous utterances and future responses are assimilated and structured in the here and the now. The dialogic nature of the narrator's intentional use of synchronic utterances allows him to claim both Alfred's and Jan Bronski's throne of patriarchal logocentricism and at the same time to speak on behalf of his now-dead, once-exploited mother, Agnes. This indicates the presence of the alien, marginalized female consciousness in the discourse of patriarchal subconscious, as indicated by the absences in Oskar's labyrinthine act of story-telling:

She screamed: go away, and he wanted to go away, but he couldn't, because Oskar was on top of them before he could go away, because I had plunked down my drum on the small of his

back and was pounding it with the sticks, because I couldn't stand listening any more to their go away go away, because my drum was louder than their go away, because I wouldn't allow him to go away as Jan Bronski had always gone away from my mother; for Mama had always said go away to Jan and go away to Matzerath, go away, go away. And then they fell apart. But I couldn't bear to see it. After all, I hadn't gone away. That's why I am the father and not this Matzerath who to the last supposed himself to be my father. But my father was Jan Bronski. Jan Bronski got there ahead of Matzerath and didn't go away; he stayed right where he was and deposited everything he had; from Jan Bronski I inherited this quality of getting there ahead of Matzerath and staying put; what emerged was my son, not his son. He never had any son at all. He was no real father. (Grass, 1959b, pp. 161-162)

The tendency of mocking the concept of fatherhood and the impregnation of the female body further increases through Oskar's ridiculous narration of the famous episode, where he encounters and accordingly desecrates a statue of Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus. At this point, the narrator's textual discourse actively seeks to decenter the whole history of Western thoughts and feelings—as signified by the phallogocentric Christianity—and make it dance to his tune. As a result, a jovial sense of carnivalesque is begotten through a grotesque parody of the long-established Grand narratives and authoritarian doctrines. By recalling the memoirs of his paying a visit to the city church, Oskar writes:

And Oskar was kneeling at the left-side-altar, trying to teach the boy Jesus how to drum, but the rascal wouldn't drum, offered no miracle. Oskar had sworn back then and swore again outside the locked church door: I'll teach him to drum yet. Sooner or later. (Grass, 1959b, p. 183)

In this regard, Christianity is caught on the horns of a dilemma and the narrative is thus effectively challenging the whole basis on which the Western society is run. As related by Oscar, “will he drum now, or can't he drum, or isn't he allowed to drum, either he drums or he's no real Jesus; if he doesn't drum now, Oskar's more Jesus than Jesus is” (p. 81). Subversion of the Jesus's authority (i.e., the “miracle” of the Jesus statue drumming) is ultimately completed by the fun-lover Oskar's probably hallucinatory narration: “for Jesus just sits there, can't drum though he wants to. Boredom starts gnawing at me as if I were a rind of Bacon – and then he struck, and all at once he was drumming!” (p. 209). In the course of narration, Oscar holds conversations with both Jesus and Satan, and later in the book, he refers to himself and his penis as “Satan.” He suggests, “Come, Satan,

Come! . . . Satan's almost there . . . dwelt within me since baptism—and was still lodged there . . .” (p. 303). In line with the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia, this can be considered as a good example of two words in one (i.e., double-voiced utterance)—a system of duality embedded in the masculine readings of transcendental hierarchies, a system of duality with two concomitant centers as God and Satan. The narrator's speech acts intentionally parody the Christian values and create a heteroglot world of words, through which the authority of European mental experience is challenged. As a result, the silenced tongues, unfelt feelings, and unvoiced utterances come into play trying to negotiate with the overarching forces of logos. Disappointed with the Christianity's incapability to solve human problems and Jesus' inability to play drums (or perform the prophetic act of writing), Oskar decides to introduce himself as real Jesus, making piety of the others through the intentional use of his glass-shattering voice, as well as his tin drum and drumsticks. Thus, Oskar's narration, filled with double-voiced utterances, provides a heteroglossia, in which even taboos and desecration of Christian orthodoxy come into play, intending to disclose the totalitarianism and insufficiency of the long-established European systems of thoughts and beliefs.

A salient feature of *The Tin Drum*'s narrative, which adds to the equivocal and heteroglot nature of its utterances, is the double-voiced character of its narrator. Oskar's character provides a forum, where the Apollonian Goethe and the Dionysian Rasputin⁴ exchange ideas and negotiate the power relations. According to Kasikhan (2012):

After reading two books, *Rasputin and His Women* and Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Oscar describes his own two souls as Rasputin and Goethe, initially suggesting a contrast. Goethe displays confrontation between nature and mind, sensuality and morality which is an inherent and inevitable essence of any human soul. (p. 6)

Kasikhan (2012) has concluded that Oskar Matzerath's double-voiced nature is a parody of Goethe's notion of *two souls* (*Zwei Seelen*) associated with the equal forces of nature (i.e., material desires) and reason (i.e., spiritual demands), because only one soul, namely the evil soul, is observed under the reign of National Socialism of the time.

In contrast to the narrator's evasiveness and irresponsibility towards the outside world is his answerability to the word (to the text as a context per se), through the absences and unvoiced speeches weaving into and out of the sites of presence. Whereas Oskar demonstrates considerable acumen to manage himself of all responsibility for his narration by thoroughly obfuscating his identity within the text, a dialogized heteroglossia at the narrative level occurs, in which the existence

of the other is irreducible. Due to such dialogism, respect for someone else's "I" is gained (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 287).⁵ According to Bakhtin, this dialogism, sets out "to affirm someone else's "I" not as an object but as another subject—this is the principle governing Dostoevsky's worldview" (Dentith, 1996, p. 41)⁶.

The text of *The Tin Drum* thereby functions as a deliberately wicked example of the turn that a text-centric model of narrative can take. Answerable only to the word—the narrator initially introduces himself with the words, "Granted: I'm an inmate in a mental institution . . ." (3)—he sets out to absolve himself of all responsibility for his text by thoroughly complicating his identity within it. The narrator's blatant disregard for narrative accountability stands in stark contrast to the event he narrates. Arnds, for example, offers a psychoanalytic reading of Oskar's irresponsible narrative and concludes that he suffers from schizophrenia: "That Oskar is schizophrenic reveals itself primarily in the style of his narration, the switch from first-person narrative to third person, at times even in the same sentence" (2004, p. 98). Oskar's narration suggests the unreasonable possibility (which he first claims not to believe, but later refers to as if it were fact) that his grandfather Koljaiczek had absconded from a deadly situation and instead moved to America to conduct a profitable business (in a description featuring details impossible for Oskar to know, as he was not yet born and his mother only a small child). Furthermore, Oskar's account of the moment of his own birth seems quite unbelievable because he claims to have had complete cognitive capacity, not to mention his further claim of having had a glass-shattering scream.

3. Mockery as an Approach to the Grotesque Carnavalesque Representation

As mentioned before, grotesque representation of the outside realities is evident in terms of "the unlikely claims that Oskar makes not only in narrating events in his life, but also in relation to their causality" (McCollum, 2013, p. 88). Oscar's narration of his physical freakishness and cognitive impairment, allegedly a feigned, self-inflicted anomaly to transcend the lifelong miseries of the adulthood, combined with the way he puts the stories of the other characters (e.g., his parodical and grotesque account of the death of his friend, Herbert Truczinski, and that of her mother as a result of conceiving a statue of Niobe and overeating eels, respectively) exposes the constructedness of our conceptions of normality and abnormality, and hence paves the way for a carnivalesque grotesque representation of the world through the words of Otherness. In this context, a deviated narrative from the long-established norms of narration is begotten. To quote McCollum (2013),

The novel *Die Blechtrommel* opens with a frame narrative that takes place in a mental institution, but makes no attempt to conceal this from the reader, instead highlighting the fact in its opening sentence: "Zugegeben: ich bin Insasse einer Heil—und

Pflegeanstalt." The phrasing of this admission seems to imply that some justification of the story's validity or the narrator's reliability will follow—some refutation of the assumption that Oskar's mental state warrants his confinement there—but none appears. Rather, Oskar plunges ahead directly into the story . . . (p. 88)

Braun (2008) has suggested that by "elevating an untrustworthy schemer to the important position of first-person narrator," on a structural level, a sociopolitical figure of authorship, for our purpose the narrator, is introduced. She also adds that "the narrator deliberately causes confusion about the course of events and his own relationship to them, calling his identity into doubt and playing petty power games with the reader" (p. 30). As observed in the novel, Oskar suspects his ancestral identity and questions the problem of fatherhood, which seems to be an eternal unresolved human problem. In the course of the narration, Oskar mentions both Alfred Matzerath and Jan Bronski as his presumptive fathers; on the other hand, he claims to be the father of Maria's son, Kurt, who may be equally the son of Alfred. This reveals the uncertainties and paradoxes in the patriarchal center and allows for decentralization of both logocentric and phallogocentric powers, while inviting the reader to be the center of one's own ideology by deciding on the said problem. Besides, the narrator is constantly evading the understanding of its reader by his pretenses and unreliability.

Oskar's narration indicates his noncompliance with the expected traits of masculine authority and communication, as revealed by his feigned cognitive impairment (not straightforward in his communications, pretending to have the speech and communicative faculties of a young child), his evident dishonesty (not having any rational competence, and instead openly undermine the reader's confidence in his truthfulness and ability to understand the implications of the events he relays), and his deliberate passivity (by cultivating an image of childlike weakness, and being largely passive throughout the story)—which rather than being seen as signs of mental illness, can instead be understood as indications of the subversion of the masculine role exhibited by Oscar as a male freak.

In view of the aforementioned, a carnivalesque representation of the other conflicting realities emerges, which allows for the negation of hegemonic masculinity and creates a sense of rejoinder in reconstructing—by way of deconstructing—the power relations. The message of such subversive narrative is to challenge the overarching powers of monologism. As quoted by Arnds, "Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia still enforces this message. According to the Russian critic, in the comic modern novel, heteroglossia is 'parodic and aimed sharply and polemically at the official languages of its given time'" (2008, p. 69).

4. Conclusion

The presented study has investigated the possibility of dialogized heteroglossia through the internal stratification of different languages—both centripetal and centrifugal forces—as demonstrated by the grotesque and irresponsible utterances of Oskar Matzerath, the protagonist-cum-narrator in Grass's *The Tin Drum*. Through a close study of the textual utterances as uttered by the said irresponsible first person narrator, the existence of the double-speechedness has been identified. Moreover, it has been shown that the considered vagueness in the narrator's act of story-telling may pave the way and lead to a sense of carnivalesque, where the long-established norms and hierarchies in the verbal-ideological life of the European logos (with its emphasis on the “metaphysics of presence” (Derrida, 1966) are intentionally subverted and destroyed. This, in turn, allows for the possibility of dialogism in terms of narrative vagueness, where different marginalized and repressed textual and contextual forces come into play with the patriarchal forces of totalitarianism.

Notes

¹Oskar, the narrator-cum-protagonist of the novel, starts his story with the unsettling admission that he is a patient hospitalized in a mental institution. According to Beyersdorf (1980), who is quoted in Mews (2008, pp. 25 & 59), Oskar “alters reality to suit his subjective conceptions of the moment” (p21). Examples of Oskar's deceitfulness in the course of his narration can best be provided by his own definition of genuine humanity as “childlike, curious, complex, and immoral” (*The Tin Drum*, p. 80), yet Oskar is a stunted, pseudo-child person with different adult, immoral attributes. Consequently, Oskar always remains enigmatic in terms of his credibility and reliability and frequently demonstrates the very idea of the innocent delinquent, who while assuming the juvenile immaculacy constantly parodies the merits and values of his contemporary adult world. The irresponsibility of Oscar's behavior and act of story-telling can also be demonstrated, for example, by his zest for taking the role of a modern Messiah, where he prefers to be identified with the Infant Jesus rather than with the adult Christ. This illuminates the narrator's inclination towards assuming the stance of a sheltered yet irresponsible child. In an overview of Napoli's work (1980), Mews adds, “Oskar maintains this stance until the very end, when he seeks ‘security . . . [within] the walls of an insane asylum’ (33) and is most likely not to ‘play the messiah they see in me’ (TD, p. 585)” (p. 95).

Mews, *Günter Grass and His Critics From The Tin Drum to Crabwalk* (New York: Camden House Pub., 2008) pp. 25, 95.

²Barthes's statement about the death of the biographical subject, the literary subject, the author—in addition to Foucault's rejection of the historical human subject as the

origin of knowledge, and instead his speculation of epistemological discourse as conditioning any scientific output in different periods of history, and hence proposition of a theory of discursive practice—paves the way for a divorce between the voice and its origin, and consequently enables the author to enter into his own death and hence the act of writing begins. This concept can be viewed also as an illumination and at the same time the justification of polyphonic possibilities within a narrative, where through the consideration of the role of the reader a dramatic change occurs.

³As posited by Carroll, three chief constituents of Foucauldian cultural critique are: “deconstructive epistemology; Freudian psychology in a textualized Lacanian form; and Marxist social theory in a textualized Althusserian or Jamesonian form” (p. 90). Deconstructive epistemology tells us how insignificant the constraints of “reality” on the human mentality are. Carroll adds, “things are what they are because we name them or describe them in one way rather than another” (p. 90). Freudian psychology suggests that the most innate characters of human psych are repressed because they are taboo. Oscar’s narrative voice, as explained in the text, proves to be dangerous and frightening to the logos. Marxist social theory, adds Carroll, “tells us that all forms of social polity, short of a communitarian utopia, are exploitative and oppressive” (p. 90). In our contemporary cultural critique, the victims of such repressive system are not only proletarians but more often the women, as well as the ethnic and sexual minorities.

⁴This mythological notion of duality revealing the dichotomy of passion and reason, that of the sensuality and spirituality, can also be paraphrased in line with the competing forces of God and Satan within an individual, the demonic and divine presences coexisting in one single entity. Both forces are to be in balance so as to maintain the integrity of any given entity.

⁵“To be means to communicate . . . to be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself . . . looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another.”

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 287).

⁶The aforementioned quotation is from Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problem of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, cited in Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (London: Routledge Pub., 1996) 41.

References

- Arnds, P. (2008). Blasphemy and sacrilege in the novel of magic realism: Grass, Bulgakov, and Rushdie. In E. Burns, M. Coleman, & S. Fernandes-Dias (Eds.), *Negotiating the sacred II: Blasphemy and sacrilege in the arts* (pp. 69-79). Canberra: The ANU Press.
- Arnds, P. (2004). *Representation, subversion, and eugenics in Günter Grass's the tin drum*, New York: Camden House.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). Discourse in the novel. In M. Holquist, C. Emerson, & M. Holquist (Eds.), *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (pp. 259-423). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Braun, R. (2008). *Constructing authorship in the work of Günter Grass*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carroll, J. (2013). Correcting for the corrections: A Darwinian critique of a Foucauldian novel. *Style*, 47, 79-112.
- Dentith, S. (1996). *Bakhtinian thought: An introductory reader*. London: Routledge Publications.
- Derrida, J. (1966). *Writing and differences*. London: Routledge Classics.
- Coleman, E. B., & Fernandes-Dias, M. S. (Eds.). (2008). *Negotiating the sacred II: Blasphemy and sacrilege in the arts*. Canberra: The ANU Press.
- Grass, G. (1959a). *The tin drum*. Trans. B. Mitchell (2009). New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publications.
- Grass, G. (1959b). *The tin drum*. Trans. R. Manheim (1990). New York: Vintage Press.
- Kasikhan, H. R. (2012). The absence of paucity and momentariness: Two new components of magic realism in Gunter Grass's *the tin drum*. *Journal of Teaching Language Skills*, 17(6), 691-714.
- McCollum, A. (2013). *Freaks and masculinity: Sideshow performers in German and American cinema*. Unpublished master's thesis, Ohio, Graduate College of Bowling, Green State University.
- Mews, S. (2008). *Günter Grass and his critics from the tin drum to crabwalk*. New York: Camden House Publications.