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**The Absence of 'Paucity' & 'Momentariness': Two
New Components of Magical Realism in Günter
Grass's *The Tin Drum***

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Abstract

This article presents the question whether it is correct to classify Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* as a work of magical realism. A brief scrutiny of the elements of magical realism, particularly *Authorial Reticence* and concept of *Hesitation* indicates that contrary to the advertisement of certain sources and publishers, this novel in certain circumstances, contradicts and opposes these two indispensable elements of magical realism. The scrutiny of the text based on the technique of 'close reading', followed by exemplification and providing excerpts from the text, helps one find out that the only distinctive feature of this narrative mode, namely *authorial reticence* is explicitly neglected and overlooked. Unlike the principles of magical realism, the protagonist of the novel attempts to provide rational explanations and logical justifications for whatever he does. Likewise, due to the lack of a firm and confident voice and lack of matter-of-fact statements of the protagonist, readers begin suspecting the accuracy and validity of his words and actions. This sustained hesitation ultimately harms the total effect of the work as being magical realism. Moreover, based on Franz Roh's famous statement regarding the palpating nature of magic, hidden behind our represented world, two conclusions are drawn: one is *paucity* or *scarcity* of magic, implying that extraordinary events should not occur incessantly and frequently. Secondly, it should happen *momentarily* and *promptly* and consequently should *not* be *controllable*, intruding our lives from the outside world. Whereas, in this novel, not only Oskar's magic power is used frequently, but also is controlled at any time he wishes.

Keywords: Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, paucity, momentariness, magical realism, authorial reticence, sustained hesitation

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1. Introduction

Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, as the first novel of the trilogy, *Die Blechtrommel* (1959) is introduced by various sources as a work of magical realism. Most reference books have classified this postwar literary work under the category of this narrative mode, such as M. H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Due to the success of magical realism in the second half of the twentieth century, many publishers are tempted to introduce almost any literary work, especially novels bearing the slightest fantastic elements, as magical realism to upgrade their sales and financial profits. They are ignorant of the fact that some works, including Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* are impressive and best-selling enough to dispense with such false propaganda.

However, regardless of the claim that this novel falls in the category of magical realism, the particular effect it leaves on the reader will definitely not decrease. Grass intends to present a seemingly little boy who is capable of an unusual and extraordinary vocal power in shaking and breaking window glasses. Like any author of magical realism that aims to illustrate major issues of people in the community in which s/he lives, it seems that Grass is satirically criticizing significant political and social problems of Germany during the Nazi and post-war era.

1.1 On magical realism

The opposing and contradictory words making up the term *magical realism* are expressive of the polarity and dualistic viewpoints held at the heart of this narrative mode. Despite resemblance to its contiguous genre—fantasy—it differs from it in the application of a few more elements, and the reality shown in magical realism seems to be much deeper and more meaningful than that depicted in conventional realism. It describes the conjunction of two worlds—the magical and the realist; an amalgamation of a rational and an irrational worldviews. The conjunction of these two distinct viewpoints not only creates a mixture of two conflicting grounds, but also aids to result in a third product that does not depend on either sides: "The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a

plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among these worlds" (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 6).

Even at the early rise of magical realism in Latin America by Ajeo Carpentier¹ and Miguel Asturias², the cross-cultural feature of Latin America and the appropriateness of this narrative mode to express this feature are emphasized. Carpentier introduces this as 'mestizaje' (culturally and racially mixed) aspect of Latin American culture. The coexistence of indigenous people of South America with the African-American immigrants provides a hybrid and multi-cultural atmosphere that turns to be the distinctive feature of Latin American literature. Writers such as Isabel Allende³ explain it as "relying on a South American reality: the confluence of races and cultures of the whole world superimposed on the indigenous culture, in a violent climate" (qtd. in Foreman, 1995, p. 286).

Being composed of varied elements such as, hybridity, textualization, authorial reticence, carnivalesque, defamiliarization, etc., this narrative mode is potentially capable of transgressing the boundaries, breaking down the absolute and allowing more than one version of truth to be proposed. It provides the possibility of expressing multiple perspectives in the text, that in turn, helps one see, understand and interpret his/her surrounding events differently. Zamora and Faris point out that magical realism "resists the basic assumption of post-enlightenment rationalism and literary realism" (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p.6).

Magical realism appears in two forms: ontological (folkloric) and epistemological (scholarly). The former derives its source material beliefs or practices from the cultural context in which the text is set; whereas the latter takes its inspiration from sources which do not necessarily coincide with the cultural context of the fiction, or of the writer. Günter Grass entwines and interweaves both ontological and epistemological views and expresses his universal concern on urgent global issues such as the energy crisis, the threat of nuclear war, a declining birth-rate, the third-world countries, etc.

Magical realism is first introduced in painting by Franz Roh in 1925 through the integration of two distinct painting schools of Impressionism and Expressionism. This new art, as Roh describes magic realism⁴, has roots in both. It is partly derived from Impressionism as it portrays objects associated with this world, and is partly derived from Expressionism as it brings new meanings to them by the aid of things not of this world. He therefore, merges the attributes of both to create this new art. He writes that Expressionism seems to have already “rejected the image of nature in favor of an exclusively spiritual world” (Roh, 1995, p. 21). He believed Magical realism “is situated resolutely between extremes, between vague sensuality and highly structured schematics” (ibid, p.23). The main function of this new art, according to Roh, is filling the gap, exalting the mundane and natural world with intellectual depth and thought.

This new art is first called *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), a term coined by Gustav Hartlaub, the German museum director. Although there are several definitions for *Sachlichkeit* such as ‘matter-of-factness’, ‘reality’, ‘relevance’, ‘functionalism’, ‘practicality’, ‘impartiality’, ‘objectivity’, it is usually introduced as *objectivity*, as that is the only frequently used meaning for the term when referring to the art of the 1920s.

There has also been much debate regarding the first person who wrote the first narrative work of magical realism. Angel Flores (1995) debates that the term is coined in 1935 after Borges⁵ *A Universal History of Infamy*. He is claimed to be the first person to assign the term to books, not just paintings. Whereas, Luis Leal (1995) does not view Borges or Kafka⁶ as influential authors in magical realism. Instead, Leal believes that in Hispanic America, Arturo Uslar Pietri⁷ should be regarded as the one who promoted magical realism. He wrote *Letras y hombres de Venezuela (The Literature and Men of Venezuela)* in 1948.

In a general view, the literary genre of magical realism paves the way for more progress and faster development of regional literature during the second half of the twentieth century, and has already left an

influential role on universal story-telling structure and the world's narrative style, including postcolonial literature.

1.2 On the novel

The novel turns round the legendary and midget character called Oskar Matzerath, born in Danzig, Germany during World War II. Being endowed with unique idiosyncratic attributes, he is quite cognizant of people's hidden thoughts and feelings from the moment of his birth. While he is still an infant, he hears his parents deciding to give him a drum as his third-year birthday present. He also overhears that he will inherit a small grocery shop, as the family business when he reaches maturity. At that very moment, little Oskar determines not to grow to maturity and decides to stop growing after receiving the drum on his third birthday. He finds an unusual repose and tranquility with the drum, and this new toy appears to be his favorite method of communication. The novel chronicles Oskar's experience during the war, his defense of a Polish post office against the Germans, and later, his role as an entertainer of German soldiers with a troupe of dwarfs. It refers to the story of the Nazi rise to power from the perspective of a gifted but crazed three-year-old character.

Oskar Matzerath, as the protagonist and the only fully realized character, displays a kind of mythical personality that has roots in German folk traditions. Since early childhood, he exhibits a rare intellectual skill and is seen quite rational and cognizant, being able to instantly perceive that all human existence is as futile as a moth's search for the flame⁸.

The charm and fascination of the drum is associated with Oskar's vigor, vitality and liveliness as well as his military attitudes to Nazi Germany. This toy also appears as the symbol of his guilt and he tries to bury it assuming that he can free himself from his numerous social responsibilities. Paradoxically, this symbol is exchanged with another symbol: hump.

The novel begins with Oskar's bizarre memoirs with an exhaustive account of his maternal grandmother, Anna Bronski. Using the versatile technique of wavering perspective, readers see a thirty-year old man at the beginning of the novel who is writing from inside a mental institution in Düsseldorf Germany, the reasons for which remain unknown to the reader until the end of the book. He voluntarily stops his growing when his mother presents him a tin drum as his birthday gift. Astonishingly, he finds out that he has been endowed with an amazing vocal power capable to vibrate and break window glasses. Unfortunately, he misuses this talent for wrongdoings, illegal actions and immoral behavior during the next subsequent years. He frequently uses his glass-shattering voice in defense of his drum that is always with him. In the passage of time, as he gets older, new living conditions and social circumstances make him stop remaining a dwarf, and incite him to grow again.

Oskar is born with a marvelous intact intellectual power, and therefore never feels any need to attend school for education. At the outset of World War II, his mother dies and he withstands the hardships and torments of war years in Danzig. During the early hours of the invasion of German troops, the Polish post office where Jan (Oskar's step-father) works is bombarded and destroyed. At that moment, Oskar is with his step-father and experiences the savagery and viciousness of war. Jan is later executed for his reluctance and unwillingness in defending the post office.

The novel is more noticeable in the sense of duality, the doctrine that there are two conflicting powers, good and evil, in the universe⁹. After reading two books, *Rasputin and His Women* and Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Oskar 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.

Oskar's dual character is also depicted from a mythological perspective: the voice of Apollo who persuades him to stay in Danzig, reminding him that the journey might be risky and perilous; and

Dionysus who induces him to go and enjoy the fun. Having consulted with them what book to read, Dionysus proposes Rasputin, and Apollo offers Goethe. It denotes that he attempts to keep a balance between these two contrastive forces.

This dualistic nature of his soul is inspired from Goethe, "by parodying Goethe's notion of *two souls* (Zwei Seelen), Grass suggests that only dark souls dwell in Nazi Germany" (Nemoto, 1993, p.35). In fact, Oskar is drawn by two equal forces of nature and reason, and is split between his material desires and spiritual demands. Grass parodies the nineteenth-century *two souls* idea and implicitly conveys that only one soul, namely the nasty evil soul, can be found among the Germans living under the reign of National Socialism.

2. Discussion

Actually, one of the most distinctive features of magical realism, distinguishing it from the other contiguous genres, especially fantasy, is the *authorial reticence*. It refers to the silence and taciturnity of the writer/narrator in the explanation of magic or description of supernatural events. S/he avoids giving comment in admission or rejection, validity or incredibility, accuracy or erroneousness of the worldviews expressed by the characters in the text. Even few words explaining the event regarding the plausibility or reliability of incidence harm the overall position of the text as being magical realism and consequently, the supernatural world would be discarded as false testimony. In magical realism the unreal should be accepted as real by both the reader and the characters in the story; otherwise, it may fall in to the genre of fantasy. The writer must strongly respect the magic, or else the magic dissolves into simple folk belief or complete fantasy and splits from the real instead of synchronizing with it.

It seems that Grass's *The Tin Drum* is devoid of the author's silence and taciturnity when one confronts magic or supernatural events. In most circumstances, the narrator/character tries to provide explanations for the incredible events he faces. It should be noted that any attempt in

justification of extraordinary events, destabilizes and undermines the overall position of the text in being magical realism and consequently, readers suspect the truth and veracity of the statements expressed by the characters. As Zamora and Faris elaborate:

In the magical realist texts ..., the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence—admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism. Magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 3).

Throughout the novel, one can detect sufficient examples and excerpts in justification of this claim that this novel cannot be classified under the mode of magical realism. For instance, when Oskar is three years old, he decides not to grow any taller physically. Since he is convinced of his own intellectual superiority, he prefers to remain a child physically as he is totally disgusted by petit-bourgeois German society. Here, the main point is that Oskar knows that nobody will believe his pause in physical growth as a natural or matter-of-fact reality. Therefore, he devises a plan so that his physical deficiency seems rational and appears medically justified.

Unlike magical realist fiction in which doubt and justification of extraordinary events are not allowed, one sees sustained hesitation in Oskar's close relatives, particularly his mother who regularly takes him to the doctor to find a logical reason or medical explanation for his physical growth deficiency. On the other hand, if it were a normal event, Oskar's doctor would never write a lengthy article to be published in medical journals and ask other doctors to help him understand what the reason of this deficiency is.

Unlike the narrative works of magical realism, in which "the unreal happens as a part of reality" (Leal, 1995, p.119), and that both the reader and characters of the novel *must* accept the unreal as real; Oskar's glass-shattering scream is interpreted as something unique and exceptional followed by surprise and applause. Elsewhere, Oskar is tempted to show

the marvelous power of his voice admired and applauded by audience. Consequently, being surprised at Oskar's incredible power of voice, the Dusters¹⁰ decide to offer him the membership of the group.

Interestingly, some years later, when Oskar decides to stop remaining a dwarf and intends to grow up physically, the same people of his family express their amazement and bewilderment. Contrary to one of the principles of magical realism, once again doctors attempt to find rational reasons or logical explanations for this unusual physical growth. Even Oskar's close relatives try to find reasons for the resumption of his growth¹¹.

In contradiction to Faris's statement that within the framework of magical realism wonders should be narrated without comment, or in a matter-of-fact way, as a child would accept them, without unnecessary questioning or query; readers remain dubious and suspicious of Oskar's narration and feel the need to verify the accuracy and validity of his words. Definitely, Grass's techniques of moving back and forth in time, mixing fantasy and reality, as well as Oskar's unreliable narration confuse the readers. As Noel L. Thomas remarks about the novel's protagonist, "Oskar speaks the language of doubt; the metaphorical language ..." (qtd. in Marston William, 1997, p.13).

Readers' doubt and hesitation is partly engendered by wavering perspective of the narrator that multiplies this state of uncertainty. For instance, when he describes the peephole he says that the warden Bruno, an obtuse eccentric, keeps a constant watch through a peephole in the door. And yet, Oskar refutes this by insisting that he himself is sometimes in front of the peephole, sometimes behind it.

Not only does the novel lack the element of authorial reticence and is based on sustained hesitation; but also in certain circumstances, it lacks a unified narrative structure. The multiple structural forms of the novel makes the events seem and sound more blurred as one approaches the end:

There is a distinctive Lewis Carrollish kind of effect in Grass's first novel: instead of things becoming clearer, the

further you penetrate into the book, they in fact appear to take on an ever more dislocated and obscure aspect. (Kampchen, 2001, p. 46).

At the end of the First Book, the narrative style changes into that of fairy-tale, a series of sentences beginning with the childish, fairy-tale *Once upon a time*. It seems that constant repetition of this phrase (i.e. once upon a time. . .) at the beginning of each sentence sows the seeds of doubt and hesitation in the reader, make one wonder if the events of the story s/he is reading have actually occurred in a realistic world or not.

Readers' hesitation is partly derived from Oskar's unique mental faculty which, to a great extent, is different from that of others. He is one of those infants whose mental development is already complete at birth. He can hear, see, and think like an adult from the moment he is born. These unique potentials have made Oskar an alien and stranger. As an exceptional child, he devises a plan to be exempted from conforming to the norms and conventions of society. Yet, his intelligence and perspicuity allow him to stand mentally above the adults to analyze their motivations. He looks at them from below and from two perspectives: both as a child and as an adult.

One must note that in the world of magical realism, all events and characters should appear normal and, consequently, no explanation is needed because no one doubts the accuracy of the unusual events or uncommon characters s/he comes across. Based on the primary feature of magical realism, adduced by Roh, in the realistic world we live in, mystery is hidden and requires to be discovered: "with the word *magic*, as opposed to *mystic*, I wished to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it" (Roh, 1995, p.15).

One may draw two subordinate and secondary conclusions out of Roh's statement: first, since magic is hidden and needs to be discovered, it cannot appear repeatedly at any time one wishes; and therefore, only in rare occasions it comes into sight. I have called this feature of magical

realism as *paucity* or *scarcity* indicating that extraordinary events should not occur incessantly or frequently. Being used frequently, magic becomes stale and cliché and that through repeated exposure, its novelty wears off. Whereas, in this novel Oskar uses his marvelous power of glass-shattering scream not once or twice, but quite repeatedly almost throughout the novel, so much so that it becomes a part of his profession and hence he is offered a job.

Frequent use of Oskar's vocal magical power, in my opinion, seems to be degraded into a weapon which he uses for self-defense or for mere amusement. The point is that if Oskar's magical scream are so accessible to be used at any time and for any trivial purposes (even for personal amusement), it would be definitely wrong to assume it *magic*, as magic occurs rarely; otherwise, it is not magical anymore. In this novel, Oskar misuses his magical power to find out to what extent people are vulnerable to the temptation of theft¹².

The second logical deduction one may draw out of Roh's statement regarding the hidden and occult aspect of magic, is that it should happen *momentarily* and *promptly*; and consequently, should *not* be *controllable* intruding our lives from the outside world. Magic in magical realism manipulates man's life momentarily and vanishes promptly. Whereas, in this novel, not only is this magic power used frequently, but also it is controlled at any time Oskar wishes. Had his power been purely magical, it should have occurred rarely and could have never been used continuously for trivial purposes as deceiving others.

One should note that Oskar is able to stop his physical growth when he is three years old and resume it again willingly some years later. Meanwhile, he can easily avail of his glass-shattering scream for various purposes: in both trivial & significant occasions. It denotes that his magical power is quite in his control. Concept of magic seems to be undermined and impaired in this novel, as it presents a kind of frequently used and controllable magic, acting merely as an instrument for cheating and deceiving people.

Oskar once confesses that he had never been a child and, therefore, needs to pretend childish behavior¹³. This fact undermines the genuineness or originality of his magic power, denoting that his dwarf physique has never been *intrinsically* magic, because it is blended with deceit and false pretension. The fact is that Oskar, during all these years, only plays the role of a dwarf; deceiving others by the aid of a controllable device, called magic.

3. Conclusion

Despite publishers' wide-range propaganda, Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* does not completely conform to all fictional elements of magical realism, as it violates and contradicts the basic element of *authorial reticence* that is the most essential feature of this narrative mode. The kind of magic employed in this novel does not comply with *paucity* and *momentariness*, two newly-coined elements for works written in magical realism. *Paucity* denotes that extraordinary events should not occur incessantly or frequently, and by the term *momentariness* it is inferred that, regarding the hidden and occult nature of magic, it should happen *momentarily* and *unprompted* (not lengthily or permanently) and consequently, it *cannot be controllable*.

Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* adduces and presents major and significant thematic issues reflecting the political and social problems of Germany during the Nazi and post-war era, located in his native Danzig and Western Germany after 1945.

To Grass, reality appears random, inorganic and deeply ambiguous. Believing that the world of everyday reality should be made strange, he challenges the conventional notions of normal reality. In Grass's *The Tin Drum*, the concept of magic is vitiated, undermined and impaired, as what one faces is a kind of *controllable* magic, appearing frequently whenever Oskar wishes. Definitely, such a controlled magic, being devoid of originality and genuineness—that is indispensable for the concept of magic in magical realism—does merely act as an instrument. The kind of magic employed in this novel lacks *paucity* & *momentariness* that not only lets magic events occur frequently, but also

allows them to last for a long time. Unlike Roh's opinion that regards an elevated status for magic; one finds out that it is merely used for trivial purposes such as cheating or deceit in this novel.

The novel advances magical realism ontologically and epistemologically. On the one hand, the beliefs, practices and actions described—as their source materials—are derived from the cultural context of the community in which the text is set; and on the other, it is influenced, motivated and derived from a variety of traditions to display Grass's concern on urgent global issues.

Notes

1. Alejo Carpentier y Valmont (December 26, 1904–April 24, 1980) Cuban novelist, essay writer, and musicologist
2. Miguel Ángel Asturias Rosales (October 19, 1899–June 9, 1974) Nobel Prize-winning Guatemalan poet, novelist, playwright, journalist and diplomat
3. Isabel Allende Llonca (born 2 August 1942) Chilean writer
4. Since the narrative mode of magical realism is originally derived and inspired from a painting style, three various forms of spelling have been distinguished: *magic realism* when there is a reference to the visual art of painting introduced in 1925 by Franz Roh, and *magical realism* when exclusively the narrative technique introduced in the 1940s is concerned. Definitely, the term *magic(al) realism* is an umbrella term when one discusses the whole artistic concept that encapsulates aspects of both *magic realism* and *magical realism*.
5. Jorge Francisco Isidoro Luis Borges Acevedo (24 August 1899–14 June 1986), best known as Jorge Luis Borges, Argentine writer, essayist and poet born in Buenos Aires.
6. Franz Kafka (3 July 1883–3 June 1924) German-language novelist of Czech Republic
7. Arturo Uslar Pietri (16 May 1906–26 February 2001) Venezuelan writer
8. Being inspired and influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd, Grass believes that life is an activity without purpose, meaning, or unifying principle. He implicitly states that God is dead and that there is a dire need for a New Messiah
9. It is only in the sense of duality that one may claim the novel follows one of the principles of magical realism: hybridity. Hybridity in literature focuses on the outcomes of mixture on one's identity and culture. It is also viewed as the cultural effect of globalization as it requires existence of different indications of other cultures to disclose a deeper and truer facet of reality that conventional realism usually fails to present.
10. The name of a band or group of young boys in the novel, committing aggressive and illegal actions.
11. His new growth is ascribed to the blow on the head and his heavy fall in an empty grave.
12. Oskar breaks the window-glasses of jewellery shops from far distance by the aid of his magic voice to examine the reaction of pedestrians who pass by the shops.
13. See *The Tin Drum* p.62

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