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Deliver Us From Evil: Clemens, Grass, and the Past that Refuses to Become History

CRUELTY, JUDITH SHKLAR INSISTS, IS THE MOST hateful of human vices.¹ It follows that self-deception cannot be far behind, for the perpetrators of cruelty almost invariably strain to forget their misdoings, or to construe them as a species of virtue. But self-deception is a froward vice, and the state of mind from which it draws back is that of being un-deceived. This inward yoking of self-deception with intimations of morally intolerable knowledge produces intermittent assaults of guilt that are likely to persist so long as their origins remain ambiguous and unaddressed. No sooner has Injun Joe—the dread half-breed who terrorizes *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*—been found dead in McDougal’s cave than the community petitions the Governor for his pardon. “Many tearful and eloquent meetings had been held,” Clemens writes with evident scorn, “and a committee of sappy women [had] been appointed to go in deep mourning and wail around the governor, and implore him to be a merciful ass and trample his duty under foot. Injun Joe was believed to have killed five citizens of the village, but what of that?” (255). Neither the author nor his fictional actors seem to recognize that this baffling behavior is the reflex of unacknowledged guilt for the myriad acts of cruelty that produced the monster in their midst.

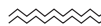
Over time, Clemens approached more nearly to a conscious reckoning with the vexed memories of racial injustice that surfaced with increasing regularity in his work. “I wonder why we hate the past so,” his good friend William Dean Howells once asked him. “It’s so damned

humiliating,” Clemens replied (82). On another occasion he described for Howells what he called his “list of permanencies—a list of humiliations that extends back to when I was seven years old, & which keep on persecuting me regardless of my repentancies” (Smith and Gibson 1:212). At the very top of that list of accusing memories was Clemens’s painful recollection of childhood complicity in the evils of race slavery. “No man,” Howells rightly observes, “more perfectly sensed, and more perfectly abhorred, slavery” than his good friend. And because Clemens “held himself responsible for the wrong that the white race had done the black race in slavery,” no man endured greater guilt for the iniquity (277). But because the pain of a thorough and fully conscious reckoning with this vexed moral issue was more than he could bear, Clemens never came fully to terms with his sense of grave personal failure. As we shall see, the complex dynamics of his moral dilemma—one that he has shared with and expressed for many generations of Americans—register quite clearly in his major writing.

In what follows I want to explore a kindred dynamic in the life and work of contemporary German novelist Günter Grass, whose memories of World War II, and most especially of the Holocaust, invite comparison with Clemens’s memories of slavery. Like Clemens, Grass has carried the heavy burden of guilt that attaches to the feeling of complicity in the darkest chapter of his nation’s history. In his autobiography, *Peeling the Onion*, which provoked a storm of controversy when it was published in 2006, Grass for the first time acknowledges that as a boy of seventeen he was a proud member of the infamous Waffen-SS. He also admits to having been a passive witness to the abuse of Jews in Danzig, his hometown, though he insists that he knew nothing until after the war about the horrors of the final solution. “But the ignorance I claim,” he is quick to add, “could not blind me to the fact that I had been incorporated into a system that had planned, organized, and carried out the extermination of millions of people. Even if I could not be accused of active complicity, there remains to this day a residue that is all too commonly called joint responsibility. I will have to live with it for the rest of my life” (111). Grass is just as clear that his work has been influenced by his need to come to terms with these accusing memories. “None of my books,” he observed in 1973, “has been free or nimble enough to elude the crime that continues to tag Germans today: the annihilation of six million Jews” (“Israel” 131). More recently, he has reaffirmed that his

writing mirrors the entanglement of a reunited Germany in the sins of its history. "After forty years apart," he noted in 1996, "all that we Germans have in common is the burden of a guilty past" ("On Loss" 150).

In their different ways, Clemens and Grass engage as artists in a kind of "writing cure."² In Clemens's case, guilt about race slavery was half suppressed and flickered fitfully in and out of consciousness; it had a way of insinuating itself into his work, and often formed an obstacle to its coherence and completion. For Grass, by contrast, guilt about the Holocaust holds a permanent place at the foreground of consciousness and is deliberately and skillfully integrated into the complex but well managed structures of meaning in virtually all of his books. It is hardly to diminish the undoubted importance of Clemens's novels to insist—as he did himself on numerous occasions—that much of the apparent design in his writing is probably unconscious in origin. "Every book I ever wrote just wrote itself," he declared toward the end of his life (qtd in Neider 346).³ The persistent, disruptive, and apparently unbidden intrusions of race slavery into his late writing are especially noteworthy in this regard. Clemens's fiction speaks with uncanny fidelity to the repressed moral anguish of white America—which is to say that guilt is most characteristically manifest in both the manner and the matter of his writing as a restive impulse straining upward, against formidable resistance, toward the surface of consciousness. By contrast, Grass seldom loses sight of the ways in which his motives and methods as a writer are themselves caught up in his leading thematic preoccupation, the repressed moral anguish of modern Germany. "History," he has written, "or, to be more precise, the history we Germans have repeatedly mucked up, is a clogged toilet. We flush and flush, but the shit keeps rising" (*Crabwalk* 122). In this respect, Grass's novels are much less "symptomatic" than Clemens's; they are shrewdly calculated fictional elaborations of the ways and means of moral evasion in which his own involvement is purposely, if often quite obliquely, put on display. Such important differences notwithstanding, both writers display great conviction and courage in drawing attention to national crimes against humanity at historical periods characterized by deep resistance, and even hostility, to their message. Both spoke the unwelcome truth to bad faith denial.⁴



In a manner reminiscent of Grass' excremental vision of German history, Clemens, in a March 1904 letter to Howells, describes his autobiography as

the truest of all books; for while it inevitably consists mainly in extinctions of the truth, shirkings of the truth, partial revealments of the truth, with hardly an instance of plain straight truth, the remorseless truth is there, between the lines, where the author-cat is raking dust upon it which hides from the disinterested spectator neither it nor its smell . . . the result being that the reader knows the author in spite of his wily diligences. (Smith and Gibson 2:782)

As I argue at length in *The Author-Cat: Clemens's Life in Fiction*, America's favorite humorist was also the most guilt-ridden of our major writers. His conscience, tireless in supplying reminders of personal shortcomings and grave offenses against others, was a permanent blight on his spirit. "Remorse was always Samuel Clemens's surest punishment," observes Albert Bigelow Paine; "to his last days on earth he never outgrew its pangs" (1:65). As the author-cat passage so well illustrates, guilt had as its emotional corollaries a strong drive toward autobiographical confession, and a correspondingly potent impulse toward "extinctions" of the morally intolerable truth. This latter gravitation to denial and evasion is a defining feature of what I have called "bad faith," the reciprocal deception of self and other in the denial of departures from widely accepted codes of morally correct behavior. Bad faith, I have argued, figures prominently not only in Clemens's life and work, but also in the audience reception of his major fiction.⁵ Because it seeks to conceal what it is at the same time powerfully compelled to reveal, bad faith inevitably falls short of its goal of complete denial; it fails, as the author-cat fails, to completely bury the noxious truth, and thus engenders an inevitable return of the repressed.

Nor does awareness of bad faith guarantee protection against its influence. Clemens elaborates on this feature of bad faith in his 1899 essay, "My First Lie and How I Got Out of It," in which he declares, "all people are liars from the cradle onward, without exception." Deceitfulness is the very essence of human nature, and it is so by virtue of an "eternal law." Since man "didn't invent the law," he is not responsible

for its effects; "it is merely his business to obey it and keep still." Clemens calls this definitive act of bad faith "the lie of silent assertion," the mute denial that humans are universally dishonest. Worse yet, this universal conspiracy invariably serves "the interest of a stupidity or a sham, never . . . the interest of a thing fine and respectable." Thus "the lie of silent assertion" has "for ages and ages . . . mutely labored in the interest of despotisms and aristocracies and chattel slaveries, and military slaveries, and religious slaveries, and has kept them alive; keeps them alive yet, here and there and yonder, all about the globe; and will go on keeping them alive until the silent-assertion lie retires from business." Among such crimes against humanity, Clemens gives first place to American slavery, an institution grounded in bad faith. "It would not be possible," he insists,

for a humane and intelligent person to invent a rational excuse for slavery; yet you will remember that in the early days of the emancipation agitation in the North the agitators got but small help or countenance from any one. Argue and plead and pray as they might, they could not break the universal stillness that reigned, from pulpit and press all the way down to the bottom of society—the clammy stillness created and maintained by the lie of silent assertion—the silent assertion that there wasn't anything going on in which humane and intelligent people were interested. (439–41)

"My First Lie" clearly illustrates that Clemens could analyze objectively in one setting a complex process of moral denial that he elsewhere fell into all unawares. As if to concede this point, he concludes the essay by humorously declining to criticize the "lie of silent assertion." "Let us be judicious," he counsels, "and let somebody else begin" (446). A more telling failure of awareness is discernible in the tension between his insistence, on one hand, that humans bear no responsibility for bending to the law of their inherent deceitfulness, and, on the other, his evident impatience with the terrible injustice countenanced by "the lie of silent assertion." Moral indignation—here freighted with the self-accusation implicit in his scorn for those who resisted abolitionism—and all-excusing moral determinism were perennial incommensurables in Clemens's groping struggle with conscience. And here

as elsewhere, the consuming issue upon which his tortured moral reasoning turns is race slavery.

"In my schoolboy days," Clemens recalls in his *Autobiography*, "I had no aversion to slavery. I was not aware that there was anything wrong about it. No one arraigned it in my hearing; the local papers said nothing against it; the local pulpit taught us that God approved it, that it was a holy thing, and that the doubter need only look in the Bible if he wished to settle his mind" (1:101). But no sooner has Clemens recorded his lack of "aversion to slavery" than he remembers "one small incident" of his boyhood—an incident, he writes, that "must have meant a good deal to me or it would not have stayed in my memory, clear and sharp, vivid and shadowless, all these slow-drifting years." His mind turns for no apparent reason to recollections of a small slave boy, "a cheery spirit, innocent and gentle," who was forever "singing, whistling, yelling, whooping, laughing." Unaccountably impatient with the jubilant clamor, young Sam went "raging" to his mother—"wouldn't she please shut him up." She replies, in tears: "Poor thing, when he sings it shows that he is not remembering, and that comforts me; but when he is still I am afraid he is thinking, and I cannot bear it. He will never see his mother again; if he can sing, I must not hinder it, but be thankful for it." (1:101–02).

Here surely is a memorable lesson in the uses of bad faith. Better the slave child should be deceived about his condition, for in his ignorance there is release for his owners from the truth of what they have done. In effect, Jane Clemens acknowledges the inhumanity of slavery, and her own complicity in it, but counsels willful self-deception; the damning reality of the situation, she suggests obliquely, is simply too much to bear. Her son registers no immediate response, but we must suppose—because he finds it all so vivid and memorable—that he is at some level attentive to what his mother's words imply. Nor is this entirely new ground to him. For what is it in the slave child's boisterous mood that so enrages young Clemens? Is it not the nascent awareness that such exultant behavior is utterly inappropriate to the slave child's actual condition? If the cheerful youngster is truly blind to reality, then his example suggests that humans have virtually unlimited tolerance for monstrous lies. The slave is grossly, pathetically deceived; but his oppressors may in turn be victims of even graver deceptions, not least the evidently imperfect lie of their own innocence. More probably, perhaps,

the child's wild outpourings of joy are expressions of a refusal or incapacity to endure the truth, a horrified recoil from intolerable deracination. The "singing, whistling, yelling, whooping, laughing" is marked by its weird excess as the dark opposite of joy. In either case, the burden of guilt is heavy, and might be expected to produce, especially in one so sensitive as Clemens, a reflex surge of anger. Little wonder that this episode found a place in his memory, where it was borne along, "so clear and sharp, vivid and shadowless," during "all those slow-drifting years."

In this instance, as so frequently in Clemens's writing about himself, concealment signals an accompanying revelation. Forgetting what the poor slave boy has lost brings temporary relief, perhaps, but no protection against abrupt future intrusions of the harsh truth into consciousness. Nor indeed is the slave's real condition ever entirely obscured. The extremity of Clemens's anger bespeaks an unsettling presentiment of the damaging truth that surfaces rather less obliquely in his mother's anguished complaint. Thus concealment and revelation appear not so much in sequence as in simultaneous dialogue with one another, the relative volume and intensity of the voices varying, but never lapsing, at least for long, into mere monologue. Variations on this pattern of remembering and forgetting, knowing and not knowing, of denial, the denial of denial, and virtually simultaneous affirmations of both the fact of denial and the things denied—all fostering the suggestion that the mind is secretly familiar with what it has ostensibly forgotten or denied—these are the staple ingredients of Clemens's memories of slavery.

Conflicting energies of precisely this description intersect in the extraordinary chapter 38 of *Following the Equator*, Clemens's account of his 1896 global lecture tour. The setting is Bombay. Delight at the physical beauty of the place and people is suddenly shattered when a burly German tourist strikes his Indian servant. "It seemed such a shame to do that before us all," Clemens complains, recoiling not so much from the deed itself as from the knowledge of it—knowledge that precipitates an entirely unwelcome recognition. "I had not seen the like of this for fifty years. It carried me back to my boyhood, and flashed upon me the forgotten fact that this was the usual way of explaining one's desire to a slave." Running darkly through his memories, which descend in a rush, is a burden of guilt that Clemens strains to dispel. Striking slaves

“seemed right and natural” when he was a boy, “I being born to it and unaware that elsewhere there were other methods; but I was also able to remember that those unresented cuffings made me sorry for the victim and ashamed for the punisher.” His insistence that his father’s physical abuse of slaves “proceeded from the custom of the time, not from his nature” promptly gives way to the memory of the brutal killing of a slave “for merely doing something awkwardly—as if that were a crime.” The conspicuous straining after moral consolation finally founders on Clemens’s repeated failures to deny that even as a child he recognized the iniquity of slavery. “Nobody in the village approved of that murder,” he concedes, “but of course no one said much about it” (347, 351–52).

This furtive, troubled train of thought comes partially to rest in a reflexive turn inward on itself, as Clemens draws back to reflect on the mystery of his own mental processes. “It is curious,” he remarks rather coolly, “the space-annihilating power of thought. For just one second, all that goes to make the me in me was in a Missourian village, on the other side of the globe, vividly seeing again those forgotten pictures of fifty years ago, and wholly unconscious of all things but just those; and in the next second I was back in Bombay, and that kneeling native’s smitten cheek was not done tingling yet.” We cannot too much emphasize that Clemens’s epistemological musings serve to distract attention from the deeper, more primary, but largely submerged impulse to achieve moral immunity. The model of mind to which he has recourse features a kind of hyper-solipsism in which the “self,” “the me in me,” is dispersed and attenuated between rapidly firing, apparently disconnected bursts of awareness. The pace is breathtaking, as the mind darts “back to boyhood—fifty years back; back to age again, another fifty; and a flight equal to the circumference of the globe—all in two seconds by the watch!” (352). Clemens does not hint at the moral consolation to be derived from his model of mind, yet his remarks are manifestly driven along such lines. In this instance, the moral reprieve inheres in the clear suggestion that consciousness is so rapid and far-flung in its movements as to have no fixed place or center. In such a construction of subjectivity, there is no real “me in me,” and thus no place for grief and remorse to take hold and fester.

But of course his self does have a center of sorts, located along the line of association connecting Bombay to Hannibal, the British Empire to the antebellum South, and the suffering Indian servant to the mur-

dered slave. Those connections have their nexus in Clemens's mind, where they intersect to form a center to consciousness, "the me in me." At one level, the associations are evidence of nascent insights into continuities between New World slavery and Old World imperialism, into America's past and present entanglements in history. It is a story not so much of innocence lost as of an illusory innocence never possessed in the first place. A version of the same story links the youthful Sam Clemens of Hannibal to the aging sojourner in Bombay. In both settings, separated by half a world, half a century, and only "two seconds by the watch," he is witness to an uncanny repetition of events from which he draws back in horror. In both, stung by the hint of his own complicity, he retreats to the imagined moral shelter of youth, ignorance, and solipsism, only to find that none of these leaves him truly, safely free from blame. The "shame" of the thing is obvious to him in Bombay, where he remembers that events in Hannibal made him sorry and ashamed. There is thus no final denying that he always already knew what was wrong, that the shame at the center of his consciousness defines him, anchors him in history, and denies him the moral repose he so longs for.⁶

As I have argued at considerable length in *The Author-Cat*, bad faith moral maneuvering of a closely kindred variety, with race slavery at its epicenter, is everywhere at large in Clemens's major fiction. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is notable for its conspicuous exclusion of slavery from its portrait of a frontier village in which slavery was a prominent fact of life. The significance of the exclusion is clearest in light of the ways in which the subsequent *inclusion* of slavery transforms that village in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Enter Jim: everything changes. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Hank Morgan confidently commits himself to the eradication of slavery in "primitive" sixth-century Britain, even as it dawns on him that slavery is alive and well in the nineteenth century. Little wonder that he fails in his quest and angrily detonates the world that resists his naively optimistic agenda. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* commenced as a farce about Siamese twins and transformed itself—for reasons that Clemens admits he cannot fathom—into a dark satire on the myriad delusions and moral evasions running through the fabric of the peculiar institution. With the exception of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*—which is surely the happiest and the most coherent of Clemens's novels—all of these installments

on “the matter of Hannibal” sink under the thematic weight of slavery into moral and esthetic confusion. This is most famously the case, of course, in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where the drift toward inevitable disaster is averted by an utterly implausible detour into comedy. However much readers may deplore it, the breakdown is richly meaningful as a window on Clemens’s deep—and deeply frustrated—drive to fashion a morally coherent narrative about American race slavery. On this subject above all others, the writing cure failed Clemens because he could not conceive a narrative that led to a just and peaceful resolution of the deeply conflicted history of racial oppression to which he felt himself a guilty party. The accusing truth of the past was invariably proof against his bad faith impulse to deny it in fiction. It was thus a story he returned to compulsively precisely because it was a story he could not complete.

The frequency and intensity of Clemens’s imaginative engagement with race slavery increased toward the end of his life, in part because it was a period of autobiographical self-reckoning, and more largely because the grim intractability of racial injustice was widely visible in an era of burgeoning imperialism and Jim Crow. Published essays such as “To the Person Sitting in Darkness” (1901), “The United States of Lyncherdom” (1901), and “King Leopold’s Soliloquy” (1905) are unequivocal expressions of his moral outrage. Meanwhile, his inward distress and confusion surfaced in scattered notebook entries (on the “negro wench,” for example [*Notebook* 351–52]), and in several fragmentary stories set in the Hannibal of childhood. Conceived as a vintage boyhood prank, “Tom Sawyer’s Conspiracy” almost perversely transforms itself into a nightmare of greed, exploitation, and bloody racial violence. In suggesting that the narrative somehow does this to itself, I am echoing Clemens’s familiar acknowledgement in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* that his stories were habitually prone to such unaccountable behavior, and that in telling themselves they invariably progressed from comedy to tragedy (*Tragedy* 309–15). I hasten to reiterate that this darkly transformative impulse is especially marked in narratives—such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson*—in which race slavery is featured.

The guilty knowledge—that harmless boyish fun was in fact deeply implicated in the crime of slavery—imperfectly evaded in the fragmentary “Tom Sawyer’s Conspiracy” resurfaces in a series of late, unfinished “dream writings” in which Clemens sought relief from his own night-

marish reality by construing it fictionally as a terrible dream from which he would eventually awaken. The most revealing of these is “Which Was It?” a long fragment of a novel recounting the nightmare of disaster dreamt by George Harrison, a rich, respected family man clearly modeled on Clemens himself. The narrative terminates abruptly just as Jasper, a former slave, turns the tables on the degraded Harrison and commences to settle his people’s “long bill” of revenge “agin the low-down ornery white race” (*Which Was* 415). Here Clemens stopped, leaving the dreamer face to face with the nightmare of retribution poised on the dark side of his waking reality. Could the historical crimes of race slavery ever be atoned, especially by a white majority withdrawn into bad faith denial? Clemens harbored no illusions about the relative distribution of blame for the situation. As he wrote to Karl Gerhardt in 1883, “whenever a colored man commits an unright action, upon his head is the guilt of only about one tenth of it & upon your heads & mine and the rest of the white race lies fairly & justly the other nine tenths of the guilt.” And lacking that atonement, would the descendents of the slaves forever plot bloody revenge against their unrepentant oppressors? We here glimpse the menacing truth imperfectly effaced by the lie of silent assertion—that the bad faith evasion of guilt on the score of race slavery would lead to the abridgement of morally requisite reparations, and therefore to the exacerbation of racial hatred. This was the bad dream into which Clemens’s stories led him, and from which he could not awaken.

This is not to say that he didn’t try. It is the leading premise of the “dream writings,” after all, that their nightmares are fictions framed by happy, prosperous realities. It is perfectly telling that Clemens was so frequently drawn to such dark realms, and that putative “reality” seemed so remote once the journey downward had commenced. Guilt compelled the revisiting of intolerable places; bad faith denial plotted the way back. Guilt prevails over denial in “Which Was It?” as it does in all of the late, fragmentary tales. Hemmed in by conscience on every side, Harrison complains: “I am to swim chin-deep in shames and sorrows the rest of my days” (260). But in another, equally transient mood he persuades himself—in perfectly good bad faith—that “troubles are only mental; it is the mind that manufactures them, and the mind can forget them, banish them, abolish them. Mine shall do it” (406). The *locus classicus* among many cognate pronouncements in Clemens’s work

is Satan's declaration, toward the end of *The Mysterious Stranger*, that "Nothing exists; all is a dream. . . . And you are nothing but a *Thought*—a vagrant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering forlorn among the eternities!" (405). As William M. Gibson has shown, Satan's morally liberating solipsism had its origins in Clemens's desperate need for relief from the guilt that overtook him at periods of family tragedy. At the time of Livy's death in 1904, most notably, he confided in his friend Joseph Twitchell that during substantial periods of each day he regarded the world "as being NON-EXISTENT. That is, that there is *nothing*. That there is no God and no universe; that there is only empty space, and in it a lost and homeless and wandering and companionless and indestructible *Thought*. And that I am that thought" (qtd. in Gibson 30).

Here, then, was Clemens's ultimate cure for insupportable guilt: self-removal to eternal solitude in infinite space. Translated almost verbatim to the conclusion of "No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger"—the last and longest version of young Satan's adventures, written during three phases of composition between 1902 and 1908—and there supplemented with the injunction to "dream other dreams, and better"—this famous passage is the surest evidence of Clemens's profound personal investment in the strategies of moral evasion on display in his unpublished late writing.⁷ "No. 44" may be read as three groping and finally abortive attempts to achieve imaginative closure with oppressive personal guilt. The first phase of composition, undertaken between November 1902 and October 1903, introduces the mysterious stranger, No. 44, and August Feldner, a well-meaning youngster who reproaches himself for failing to take the side of the mild, rather Christ-like newcomer against a company of hostile printers. Like Clemens himself, August is terribly "ashamed" of his moral failures, which leave him feeling "shabby and mean" (247). Like Clemens again, he warms to the moral consolations of determinism. "Why do you reproach yourself?" No. 44 obligingly inquires; "You did not make yourself; how then are you to blame?" Evidently relieved, August observes "how perfectly sane and sensible," and how "intelligent and unassailable" (250) his friend's advice is. Yet relief is short-lived. The craven August once again denies No. 44, only to suffer humiliating public exposure. And here Clemens left him, hopelessly awash in bad faith denial.

In the second phase of composition, undertaken during the first six months of 1904, August again tries to find ways to shield his new

friend from the wrath of the printers, who threaten to go out on strike if the strange outsider is not fired. When various expedients fail to ease the crisis, No. 44 creates exact “duplicates” of the inhabitants of the castle, who complete the necessary work, thus infuriating the “originals.” When blame is laid on No. 44, he suddenly appears, and then just as suddenly expires in a “dazzling white fire.” August is now “full of sorrow and also of remorse” for his many “failings of loyalty [and] love” to the departed boy. “There were more of these sins to my charge than I could have believed,” he laments; “they rose up and accused me at every turn.” He seeks release from guilt in various rationalizations, but then wearily concedes: “I was trying to excuse myself for my desertion of him in his sore need . . . but in every path stood an accusing spirit and barred the way; solace for me there was none” (309–10).

Forty-Four soon returns from the dead—“it is nothing,” he declares, “I have done it many a time!” (313)—and explains to the conscience-stricken August that a duplicate is the embodiment of the “Dream-Self,” which is joined to the “Waking-Self” by the “Soul,” or unconscious. August is especially impressed to learn that duplicates, who have lively imaginations and enjoy a wide range of pleasures, are strangely exempt from guilt of any kind. By contrast, No. 44 reflects, the “Waking-Self” endures a degraded life. “I have always felt more sorry for it and ashamed of it,” he tells August—with special attention to the all-defining determinism (“What is written must happen”) that encompasses the mind itself, which “is merely a machine, that is all—an automatic one,” over which we have “no control” (333). These are of course the familiar features of Clemens’s wrestling with the riddle of life’s misery, and with his special incubus, guilt. And Clemens surely knew—what August soon learns—that grasping the mind’s tripartite structure is one thing; avoiding the snares of conscience is quite another.

Relations between the three selves are dramatized in a romance plot involving August Feldner and Marget Regen, the master’s niece, which displaces the print shop conflict at about the midpoint of the second section of the narrative. In their competition to win the love of Marget’s multiple selves, August’s corresponding selves are hopelessly divided against themselves. The boy soon finds that he has the power to manipulate Marget to his will, but only by keeping her in ignorance of what he has done. Should he tell her the whole truth? “No,” he decides,

I couldn't bring myself to it, I couldn't run the risk. I must think—think—think. I must hunt out a good and righteous reason for the marriage without the revelation. That is the way we are made; when we badly want a thing, we go to hunting for good and righteous reasons for it; we give it a fine name to comfort our consciences, whereas we privately know we are only hunting for plausible ones. (348)

Predictably, August's "injurious lies" completely backfire, leaving him more entangled than ever in the snare of conscience. "Good heavens!" he exclaims, "I had only ruined myself" (353). It was at this moment of complete moral defeat that Clemens terminated the second phase of composition.

In the final phase, undertaken in June and July 1905, the amoral No. 44 offers to solve August's romantic problems by killing off the competition. August accepts his friend's proposal not because it is morally defensible—quite obviously it is not—but because it seems to promise to remove the sources of his guilt from sight and mind. Not surprisingly, the bad faith ruse fails utterly, leaving August vulnerable to spasms of moral tergiversation that precipitate a rupture in his sense of himself. He is startled to find that he no longer recognizes his own voice, and that his image in the mirror is "merely a resemblance" of himself, "nothing more" (363–64). This unsettling split in his identity is of course linked directly to the precarious division that has opened in his moral nature.

Clemens's initial attraction to the notion of multiple selves was quite characteristically driven by the dual impulses to acknowledge conscience and, at the same time, to neutralize its moral significance. Though this approach afforded him a certain theoretical leverage on the problem, his helpless subjection to guilt was the insuperable obstacle to permanent relief. Just so, August is compelled by the very intensity of his guilty suffering to seek such shreds of comfort as he can find on the "innocent" side of his tripartite identity. He is fascinated by his Dream-Self Schwarz's immunity to guilt. "Come! surely," he says, "you've got a heart hidden away somewhere." But his tone of reproach is quickly overtaken by the spontaneous admission, "Land, I wish I were in your place!" (368) Wouldn't it be grand, we can hear Clemens exclaim, to live free of guilt!

Schwarz complains bitterly about his confinement in “bonds of flesh—this decaying vile matter” in which his “spirit is imprisoned,” and implores August to intercede for him with No. 44, who alone can restore him to his “natural” condition. “Oh, this human life,” he protests, sounding very much like Clemens himself, “this earthly life, this weary life! It is so groveling, and so mean; its ambitions are so paltry, its prides so trivial, its vanities so childish” (369). August can take little pleasure in all this, as it is of course his own degraded mortal condition that his Dream-Self describes with such contempt. Worse still, in contrasting the lives of waking and dreaming selves, Schwarz places almost exclusive emphasis on the oppressive weight of conscience in the first, and on its blissful absence in the second. He has nothing but scorn for August’s imperishable guilt and fear of reproach, which he dismisses as “inconsequential.” “Why should they concern me, a spirit of air, habitant of the august Empire of Dreams? We have no morals; the angels have none; morals are for the impure; we have no principles, those chains are for men” (370). August offers no resistance to the notion that it is guilt above all things that makes mortal life “odious.” Once it is taken out of play, Schwarz reveals, all other forms of constraint fall away, and the unfettered reign of the pleasure principle commences. That he speaks for Clemens in all this goes without saying.

As if to affirm the Dream-Self’s point, No. 44 suddenly materializes and relieves the grateful Schwarz of his earthly bonds. True to form, however, this happy trend soon takes its inevitable turn toward darkness when conflict in the castle suddenly grows violent. No. 44 successfully quells the disorder by appearing before the crowd in a brilliant flood of light, and then, in what August describes as “the very greatest marvel the world has ever seen” (396), he reverses time. Quite characteristically, Clemens’s imagination is drawn to the idea of freedom from guilt, a state achieved in this instance by reverse time-travel. Such seemingly promising developments are no sooner set in motion, however, than their moral liabilities come to view. For August finds that in glancing backward over time, his eye invariably falls on the myriad heartbreaks and catastrophes of the past. “In every city funerals were being held again that had already been held once, and the hearses and the processions were marching solemnly backwards; where there was war, yesterday’s battles were being refought, wrong-end first; the previously killed were getting killed again” (400). Caught off guard yet once

more by his unaccountable gravitation to the nightmare of history—to that in the past that he could neither forget nor endure—Clemens set his manuscript aside, this time more or less for good.

William M. Gibson appends two final chapters to his reconstruction of “No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger.” The first, Chapter 33, was written last, in 1908, and “may have [been] intended,” Gibson speculates, “as an alternative ending to the whole” (11). The brief narrative features another of No. 44’s brilliant “effects,” the Assembly of the Dead, a ghoulish procession of the skeletons of legendary figures from the past. As usual, August is initially taken with the show, but before long he begins to recognize “skeletons whom I had known, myself, and been at their funerals, only three or four years before” (400). Here, we may confidently surmise, No. 44’s extravaganza precipitates an entirely unplanned descent into guilt-laden memories of Livy’s death and funeral, just four years earlier. A few hours after his wife’s passing, Clemens wrote to Howells of his gratitude “that her persecutions are ended. I would not call her back if I could” (Smith and Gibson 2:785). Yet it is the clear implication of the Assembly of the Dead that life persists in some form after death. The precious consolations of oblivion are thus cancelled in a vision of perdurable human misery on the other side of the grave. Borne down yet once more by the perverse gravity of his memory and imagination, Clemens thrust the offending vision from his consciousness. “All of a sudden,” the fragment abruptly concludes, “44 waved his hand and we stood in an empty and soundless world” (403).

The Assembly of the Dead, like all of Clemens’ essays into the untried dimensions of time, space, and identity, failed to provide the moral respite for which he was so desperately groping. All such avenues, no matter how remote and extreme, brought him back to the anger and misery and loneliness—and guilt—at the dark center of his inescapable self. Such is the larger significance of the chapter that Gibson places at the very end of “No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger,” which features the familiar declaration that life is nothing more than a solipsistic dream, and that the key to happiness is therefore simply to “dream better dreams.” Clemens wanted desperately to believe this, and yet he could not. As he explained in his letter to Twichell, “a part of each day Livy is a dream, and has never existed.” But during the rest of the day, “she is real, and is gone. Then comes the ache and continues” (qtd. in Gibson 31).

Poor Clemens's pain, we know, was a species of grief made unbearably heavy by the guilt that invariably came with it. His self-accusing sense of responsibility for the suffering and death of all those close to him, and for all the real and imagined errors of his long life—the crime of complicity in slavery chief among them—was keenly felt, and grew worse with time. “No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger,” like all of his late fiction, is the record of the desperate need, never satisfied, to ease the interminable sting of conscience. The consolations of determinism were a slender stay against the potent, morally perilous instinct of freedom and the reflex refusal to relinquish choice. Doubling and trebling of the personality into regions, conscious and unconscious, of light and dark, failed utterly as a restraint on ubiquitous, Argus-eyed conscience. The retreat to dreams yielded temporary relief, but no permanent defense against shattering relapses into waking anguish. Flights outward into the remoteness of space and time invariably circled back to the familiar, morally compromised places and memories from which they sprang. Solipsism, nihilism, and retreats to moral relativism (as in the fragmentary “Three Thousand Years Among the Microbes”) on self-approving terms were unsustainable. On one side, Clemens took moral responsibility for virtually everything that fell within range of his consciousness, and most especially for the cruel suffering of America's slaves; on the other, he was incapable of acquiescing for long in any of the bad faith schemes of evasion and denial that routinely crossed his mind. His fiction may be read as the record of this lifelong, accelerating, and ultimately losing battle with conscience.



Günter Grass was born in Danzig (now Gdansk, Poland) in 1927 to a Protestant ethnic German father and a Roman Catholic mother of Kashubian-Polish background. He was raised a Catholic, and lived with his parents and younger sister over the family grocery store. Because he was unhappy at home, and shared the common youthful appetite for heroic adventure, he volunteered for the submarine service early in the war, later joined the Reich labor service, and finally, in November 1944, served in the Waffen-SS as a Panzer tank gunner. Still a boy of seventeen, he was wounded in 1945 and sent to an American POW camp. After the war he trained as a stonemason, studied art, and quickly earned a reputation as a poet, novelist, sculptor and painter.

The Tin Drum, published in 1959 when he was only thirty-two, was a major popular and critical success both in Germany and abroad. Widely regarded as the premier German novelist of his time, Grass was the 1999 Nobel laureate in Literature.

Until very recently, it was widely understood that Grass—a fierce critic and satirist of German society—had been too young during the war to have been involved in anything more than youth organizations and regular army service. That he had been a member of Himmler’s elite Waffen-SS—a group closely tied to Hitler, managers of the concentration and extermination camps, known for their ruthlessness and cruelty, and designated war criminals at Nuremberg—was virtually unknown until 2006, when Grass finally told all in his remarkable autobiography, *Peeling the Onion*. “What I had accepted with the stupid pride of youth,” he admits, “I wanted to conceal after the war out of a recurrent sense of shame. But the burden remained, and no one could alleviate it. . . . I will have to live with it for the rest of my life” (110–11). The book has sparked international comment and controversy, much of it critical of a high-profile Jeremiah who has been as relentless in his assaults on Germany’s evasive treatment of its wartime history as he has been secretive about his own. “Why was this man,” asks Ian Buruma, “who has dissembled for so long about his own past, so eager to expose the shameful secrets of others? Why was he so intent on imposing a collective guilt on his people, as if all Germans had followed Hitler as blindly as he had?” (83).⁸

I am prompted to put Grass in company with Clemens for a number of reasons. Both were exposed in their early lives to deeply shameful national crimes against humanity: Clemens to race slavery, Grass to Nazism and the Holocaust. As we have seen, Clemens was at first morally unmoved by the evident cruelty of the peculiar institution, and came only gradually to a reckoning with the horror that he had witnessed as a child. The same is true of Grass. He acknowledges in *Peeling the Onion* that as an eleven-year-old he “was very much a curious spectator” as Jews were violently persecuted in Danzig. “Nothing more. No matter how zealously I rummage through the foliage of my memory, I can find nothing in my favor. My childhood years seem to have been completely untroubled by doubt.” He was an enthusiastic servant of the Reich in wartime; he later recoiled in “disbelief” from the pictures of Bergen-Belsen (“the piles of corpses”) that his American captors

showed him; and in the years immediately after the war he “didn’t look back, or else took only a short, frightened peek over my shoulder” (18–19, 64, 285–86).

As *The Tin Drum* demonstrates, Grass’ moral awareness and sense of guilt sharpened dramatically with the passage of time. Indeed, looking back in retrospect from the revelations in *Peeling the Onion*, it is irresistibly clear that competing impulses to reveal and to conceal the guilty truth have been pervasive in his writing, almost from the start. As Julian Preece has aptly observed, “Grass had always said that it was ‘guilt’ that got him writing in the first place: surely we always knew that he had something to feel guilty for” (4). Properly suspicious of the evasions performed by memory, and alert to the seductions of denial, Grass has surrendered in his work to the certainty that “there is no end to writing after Auschwitz” (*Two States* 123). Willy-nilly, the at once unbearable and unforgettable nightmare of “German culpability for the criminal conduct of the war” (“On Loss 152) has never been far from his mind. “For as long as I have been a writer,” he observed in 1999, “history, and German history most insistently, has stood in my way. It has been impossible to avoid” (“Literature and History” 255).⁹

For Grass, as for Clemens, writing has been integral to an ongoing and imperfect “cure” for a conscience burdened by memories of what he describes in *Peeling the Onion* as “a crime that did not diminish over the years and for which no statute of limitations would ever apply, a crime that grieves me still” (196).¹⁰ More broadly, his work has been for Germans—what Clemens’s has been for Americans—the expression of an enduring national struggle to come morally to terms with the crimes of the past. Grass and Clemens are towering national literary figures who have published canonical novels—*The Tin Drum* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—which satirize the cruelty and hypocrisy of societies strangely blind to the enormity of their histories. “For the last forty years,” observes Saul Friedlander, “Germans belonging to at least two generations have been caught between the impossibility of remembering and the impossibility of forgetting” Nazism and the Holocaust (2).¹¹ Friedlander is witness in German culture to a version of what I have described as bad faith, with its characteristic tension between impulses to remember and forget, to confess and deny, to tell and untell. Grass and Clemens are alike in their susceptibility to bad faith, as they are in their late-life attempts to “come clean” about their personal entangle-

ments in the past—Grass in *Peeling the Onion*, Clemens much more sporadically and obliquely in scattered correspondence, autobiographical reflections, and in published and unpublished writings.

But here the striking similarities give way to an equally important difference. Clemens is fitful, groping, and frequently unconscious in his relationship to bad faith. True, in “My First Lie and How I Got Out of It” he sets out a penetrating analysis of “the lie of silent assertion” as it influenced American resistance to the abolition movement. More often than not, however, his guilt on the score of slavery arises abruptly and partially disguised, as it does so memorably in the Bombay section of *Following the Equator*; or it surfaces unsummoned into installments on the matter of Hannibal, frequently as an insuperable obstacle to the completion of the tale. By contrast, Grass is almost invariably the knowing analyst of bad faith, fully conscious of its operations in himself, in German society, and in his writing. He admits that in the years just after the war he shrank from his sense of moral responsibility “and wanted to belong among the less guilty.” But such specious comfort could not be sustained in the face of what he came to recognize as the multiform ruses of bad faith denial in the world around him.

There were plenty of people . . . who ‘were only obeying orders.’ . . . Then they listed the mitigating circumstances that had blinded and misled them, feigning their own ignorance and vouching for another’s. No matter how elaborate their excuses and protestations of newborn-babe innocence, these all-too-eloquent anecdotes and human-interest stories . . . are actually meant to divert attention from something intended to be forgotten, something that nevertheless refuses to go away. (*Peeling* 91–92)

Thus where Clemens inadvertently betrays his own entanglement in the American culture of moral denial, Grass surveys German society with considerable critical detachment. Indeed, the clear-eyed satirical exposure and analysis of German bad faith had become a major literary preoccupation by the time Grass commenced writing *The Tin Drum*.

As Michael Hollington has observed, Grass’ first novel everywhere betrays the artist’s determination to “rescue . . . the past from oblivion,” and thereby to compel his countrymen to accept responsibility for

their history (20). His principal instrument in this enterprise is Oskar Matzerath, the narrator and leading actor in *The Tin Drum*, who in 1954, when he is thirty, completes his autobiography while an inmate at a German mental hospital. Oskar is a clairvoyant from birth who, after only three years of life, has grown so contemptuous of adult reality that he stages a fall down the cellar stairs that renders plausible his secret decision to stop growing. Now a very knowing midget who passes on purpose and quite successfully as an innocent child, Oskar is given ready access to the complex, often debased intimate lives of his family and petit bourgeois community in Danzig during the years of growing Nazi hegemony between 1927 and 1945. He makes himself felt in the larger adult world by playing his toy drum, from which he is inseparable, and by high-pitched screams that can destroy glass targets at considerable distance. Though he is a highly unreliable narrator whose attention seldom disengages from immediate, quotidian realities, his story is nonetheless replete with oblique satirical glimpses into the violent history and culture of Nazism and the Holocaust. Thanks to what may be an accident at the funeral of the man who may be his father, in the third and final Book of the novel Oskar reenters history as an adult of slightly increased physical stature. His subsequent adventures in the morally amnesiac Germany of the post-war “economic miracle” culminate in his arrest and incarceration in the asylum where he completes his autobiography.

The Germany to which Oskar bears witness in *The Tin Drum* is engaged in a prolonged, highly complex bad faith refusal to accept responsibility for its complicity in the murderous brutality of Hitler's Reich. “A nation's guilt,” as Patrick O'Neill has argued, is the novel's “incipient theme” (31), represented from the perspective of a selfish, manipulative, opportunistic imp who is himself deeply entangled in the pervasive culture of denial. Toward the end of the novel, Oskar finds work at the Onion Cellar, an exclusive club whose customers use onions to induce a purgative bout of weeping. These are the prosperous, forward looking economic elite who seek relief from the accumulated guilt borne by those who live in what Oskar describes as “our century, which in spite of all the suffering and sorrow will surely be known to posterity as the tearless century” (525). It is Oskar's role to assure that the club's patrons successfully jettison their guilt feelings, but without having to face the dire historical realities which give them rise. He

orchestrates their bad faith denial first by reminding them of the wicked black Witch—the pervasive embodiment of their repressed guilt—and then by using his drum to transform them “into a band of babbling, happy children.” This carefully monitored retreat to “childhood bliss” (538) of course recapitulates Oskar’s earlier, equally contrived attempt to withdraw from the toils of guilty adult complicity.

Oskar’s attitude toward grownups ranges from humorous condescension to something approaching disgust. “Mature” humans, he generalizes, are “childlike, curious, complex, and immoral” (80). As the price of avoiding the responsibilities that fall to such people, he reluctantly engages in the “occasional bed-wetting, [the] childlike babbling of evening prayers, [the] fear of Santa Claus . . . [the] indefatigable asking of droll, typically three-year-old questions . . . all this nonsense that grownups” expect of him. (212) So successful is Oskar at cultivating his “little art in secret” (114) that the ironic narrator of Grass’ later novel, *The Rat*, refers to him as “that angel of innocence, who took part in everything without taking part” (216). Thanks to his skillful masquerade, he enjoys a measure of immunity to the adult behavior, which he surveys from his privileged perspective. He describes without comment the collective postwar guilt of “all those who said to themselves: ‘Let’s do our stint now; when things begin to look up we’ll have it over with and our consciences will be all right’” (*Tin Drum* 436). He is witness to the petty infidelities and perversities of the adults in his petit bourgeois community. He looks on as his mother engages in a sordid love affair with her cousin, Jan Bronski, whom Oskar likes to think of as his father.

Most crucially, and as Patrick O’Neill has observed, Oskar watches as lower-middle-class society in Danzig “pieces together its acceptance of Nazism,” just as his legal father, Alfred Matzerath “puts together his uniform, starting with the cap signifying allegiance to a political ideal and ending with the ‘shit-brown’ boots that soon will be kicking in the windows of Jewish storefronts” (23).¹² Oskar follows Matzerath to a party rally, but prefers to view the proceedings from behind the stage. “Everyone who has ever taken a good look at a rostrum from behind,” he observes, “will be immunized ipso facto against any magic practiced in any form whatsoever on rostrums” (*Tin Drum* 119). He makes constant reference to the apparently random violence in the world around him, a violence that is increasingly focused on Jews: the victims of

Kristallnacht; the gentle Sigismund Markus, who loves Oskar's mother and commits suicide rather than face the Nazi thugs; Mr. Fajngold, the tragic kapo who survives Treblinka, but loses his entire family there, and loses his mind as well. But freighted though it is with observed violence, cruelty and hypocrisy, Oskar's narrative is nearly empty of resistance to what he sees. He is, we are reminded, a character who masquerades as a three-year-old child because he prefers the illusion of innocence to the intolerable reality of adult moral experience. But of course the very impulse to retreat into factitious innocence testifies to Oskar's highly precocious familiarity with its opposite. In fact, he is very much like the adults he observes, only much more adept than they are at concealing his inner sense of degradation.

Our attention turns, then, from Oskar the guarded observer of German history to Oskar the embodiment of the psychological means by which the actors in that history negotiate their moral relationship to it. This is to say that the strange child-man exemplifies the myriad and ingenious ways and means of German bad faith. Clearly enough, the patrons of the Onion Cellar share Oskar's hunger for relief from guilt. He knows even better than they do what they want, and he provides it, at considerable profit to himself, by affording them access to the illusion of childish innocence. But the pied piper is not taken in by the show. Quite to the contrary, Oskar's plausible public persona is twinned inseparably with an extraordinarily complex inner self, one who knows that fooling all the others is easy, not least of all because they want to be taken in, but who fears at the same time that all the tools of deception at his disposal will not suffice to produce the settled moral peace of mind that he craves above all things. Oskar's extreme doubleness thus gives expression in high relief to the tense interplay in bad faith between morally stricken drives to remember and to forget.

Oskar's headlong dive down the stairwell is only the most obvious and extreme of his strategies of moral denial. His narrative opens to a celebration of whiteness: first his "white-enameled" bed at the mental hospital (the bed has "become a norm and standard," he insists), and then the "ream of virgin paper" that he orders for his autobiography (15–16). His repeated demand for shelter under his grandmother's copious skirts gives emphatic expression to his longing for the oblivion of the womb; his attraction to nurses—who impart comforting ministrations to his passive, three-year-old body—is morally regressive in the

same way. But though he never says as much, it is clear that Oskar sees such behavior for what it is; indeed, his retreat from responsibility is at times made so conspicuous that we grow suspicious of ulterior motives. Is he really this averse to guilt? Or is he simply playing a part in order to mislead us, perhaps to draw our attention away from other, more important moral departures? The net effect of his behavior, here as elsewhere, is so marked in its ambiguity as to suggest that Oskar is elusive on purpose and as an end in itself. In a world as densely saturated with guilt as his is, where the moral terrain is a minefield of anguished secrets, and where unanticipated intimations of complicity are therefore unavoidable, bad faith denial may well take its ultimate refuge in the cultivation of undecidability.

Consider Oskar's extraordinary vocal powers, his ability to shatter glass with precision and at considerable distances. He screams for a variety of reasons and in numerous settings, but always as the expression of his alienation from the world of adults. "Like a chaste and therefore merciless diamond," he writes, "my voice cut through the doors of glass cabinets and, without losing its innocence, proceeded inside to wreak havoc on harmonious, graceful liqueur glasses" (64). Yet for all his emphasis on its innocence, the sound of broken glass in Oskar's world is inevitably reminiscent of the savagery of *Kristallnacht* in early November, 1938, when gangs of Nazi thugs attacked thousands of Jewish businesses and homes, leaving many dead and injured, sending many more to concentration camps, and filling the streets with broken glass. Is Oskar's extraordinary vocal power the instrument of his outrage against such adult crimes? Or, rather, is it obliquely expressive of his complicity in the violent abuse of innocent people? And is his insistence on the innocence of his screaming to be taken literally? Or is he protesting too much, and on purpose? There is simply no way of knowing. But, again, in a moral environment so thick with guilt that all things, no matter how apparently benign, are contaminated, studied elusiveness may seem to be the safest ground.

"History," Grass reiterated in 1999, "will throw its shadow far into the next century. We cannot escape it." His declaration bears on its face the implication that he has tried—just as Oskar, another strongly autobiographical writer, has tried—to escape into the clear light of a new day. But "even the cleverest artistic infidelities," Grass continues, "have lead me again and again into [history's] meandering path" ("Literature"

255). Like Oskar, he has resorted in his writing to a variety of bad faith strategies of evasion, only to find that all such maneuvers lead back to the same painful reckoning with the past. Guilt lurks everywhere. “You can’t lock up disaster in a cellar,” Oskar observes. “It drains into the sewer pipes, spreads to the gas pipes, and gets into every household with the gas. And no one who sets his soup kettle on the bluish flames suspects that disaster is bringing his supper to a boil” (*Tin Drum* 197). Oskar’s words are themselves striking confirmation of his point about the omnipresence of guilt. In his own futile flight from moral entanglement, he hurls himself into a cellar; and, quite ironically, the gas used to murder millions of Jews and other undesirables has found its way into the figures of his speech. There is no retreat from guilt through language—no viable writing or talking cure, no sustainable narrative constructions—because the very medium of egress is deeply dyed in the blood of millions. And silence itself seems to speak of their obliteration.

Oskar’s reflections on the inexorable spread of guilt appear in the final chapter of Book One of *The Tin Drum*, which foregrounds the pervasive moral perversion of even the proudest words. The chapter’s title, which invokes the familiar Pauline triad, “Faith, Hope, Love,” gives access to an account of Kristallnacht, and to the advent of “the heavenly gasman,” who now stands in place of the gentle savior, Jesus Christ. The narrative features Oskar’s multiple renderings of the same brief narrative, which in each iteration descends to some unacceptably dark outcome. Taken in the aggregate, the brief, serial variations amount to a kind of fugue, a frantic narrative flight from the insidious spread of guilt-laden implication. But there is no place to hide; the lethal gas seeps into every verbal reconstruction of a hopelessly fallen reality. The principal character in the stories is a drunken trumpeter named Meyn, a member of the SA who—with “conspicuous bravery”—sets fire to a synagogue on Kristallnacht, but who is later expelled from the corps for killing his cats, behavior deemed “inhuman cruelty to animals” and “conduct unbecoming a storm trooper” (201). Having described a world of such total moral perversion, Oskar retreats from irony to a posture of ignorance, insisting that words are now like sausage casings, filled with unknown but almost certainly unhealthy ingredients. “I know not wherewith they fill the dictionaries or sausage casings,” he insists; “I know not whose meat, I know not whose language. . . . And

never will we learn who had to be reduced to silence before the sausage casings could be filled, before books could speak, stuffed full of print, I know not" (205). Perhaps intentionally, Oskar protests too much; for his chapter is eloquent in describing the morally twisted historical reality from which he takes flight into futile professions of ignorance. Just as his reiterated narrative refuses to close on acceptable terms, his words serve only as markers of his failure to control their meaning, and thereby to afford him moral refuge.¹³

It is entirely of a piece with Grass' emergent analysis that guilt in Oskar's narrative should lodge not in grand traditional symbols, but rather in the very staples of quotidian life. Consider the eels that make his mother sick to her stomach when, on a Good Friday excursion to the seashore, she watches as they are fished out of the ocean in the head of a horse that has been used for bait. By some strange affective chemistry, the unnatural spectacle unleashes in the conscience-stricken woman the fear that she is pregnant with yet another deformed, illegitimate child—another Oskar. In an apparent attempt to induce an abortion, she literally eats herself to death on eels and other fish. Oskar is also riveted by the ghastly scene, which triggers memories of his father's attraction to Nazism, his mother's hapless surrender to illicit sex, and his own knowing withdrawal into "utter passivity," womb-like seclusion, and fantasies of nurses who minister to his "small, supposedly sick body" (155–56). As Grass explains in the audio commentary that accompanies the DVD version of the celebrated 1979 film production of *The Tin Drum*, guilt is the driving force in the episode. But for Oskar, who admits to feeling guilt for "poor mama's death" (*Tin Drum* 174), all avenues of moral retreat lead back to the horrifying scene at the seashore. His "pure and airy vision of the nurse's uniform" is soon displaced, he complains bitterly, by the memory of "the longshoreman . . . pulling eels from the dripping, crawling horse's head" (159). The chapter, pointedly entitled "Good Friday Fare," ends in darkly twisted and hopeless variations on the Easter sacrifice and its sequel, the promise of Pentecost.¹⁴

Even more ordinary than eels are the onions that figure so prominently in Grass' work. He everywhere emphasizes that the humble vegetable is closely associated with guilt, which remains buried in the mind "as sediment—not a stain to be removed or a spill to be wiped away." Early on in life, he writes in *Peeling the Onion*, the memory

learns to think of itself as beyond the statute of limitations, as long since forgiven, as smaller than small, next to nothing, yet there it is, as the onion sheds skin after skin, permanently inscribed on the youngest skins, now in capital letters, now in subordinate clause or footnote, now clear and legible, now barely decipherable hieroglyphics. The brief inscription meant for me reads: I kept silent. (28)

The process of opening and reading “the memory skin by skin” (330–31) is never-ending because its messages are “seldom unambiguous and often in mirror-writing or otherwise disguised. . . . as if a mystery-monger from an early age, while the onion was still germinating, had decided to encode itself” (3). Reflecting, for example, on the sudden wartime disappearance of Wolfgang Heinrichs, a school friend and son of an anti-Fascist, Grass quite deliberately casts himself in the mold of Oskar Matzerath. Heinrichs “remained in my mind,” he reports, “because I had been content to know nothing or to believe false information, because I had used my status as a child to play dumb and accepted his disappearance without a murmur, and once more dodged the word why, so that now, as I peel the onion, my silence pounds in my ears” (18). Such revealing associations link in turn to the Holocaust and, Grass reveals, to “Paul Celan, who understood sooner than I did that the first book [*The Tin Drum*], with its galloping 730 pages, did not tell the whole story, but rather that this profane epic onion had to be unpeeled layer by layer, and that I must not take a break from the peeling” (*Two States* 112–13). With Celan’s encouragement, Grass went on to complete “the Danzig trilogy,” and to complicate even further the multiform significance of the lowly onion. In *Cat and Mouse*, the second of the three novels, Pilenz, the guilt-ridden narrator, recalls that everything “smelled in those war years of onions,” adding, “I won’t try to determine what else was stewing . . . although jokes about the onion shortage, in connection with Field Marshal Goering, who said something or other about short onions on the radio, were going the rounds.” Drawing nearer still to the unbearable implication of his account, Pilenz speculates: “Perhaps if I rubbed my typewriter superficially with onion juice, it might communicate an intimation of the onion smell which in those years contaminated all Germany . . . preventing the smell of corpses from taking over completely” (130). German history, culture,

and language are so saturated with guilt, Grass suggests, that even the most ordinary of vegetables bears its stain. The onion is the profoundly overdetermined figure for unimaginably cruel deeds, their layered record in memory, their superficial purgation, and their ubiquitous dissemination in the fabric of quotidian German life. It is not so much a symbol as it is the concrete embodiment of a deeply ingrained and pervasive bad faith process of remembering and forgetting, telling and untelling, driven by the unbearable sense of complicity in the Holocaust. As the olfactory supplement to Pilenz's troubled autobiographical narrative, it is at one remove the artist's fully conscious admission of guilty participation in the crime, and his pledge to resist in his work the myriad mechanisms of its denial.

We may be confident that Grass draws on personal experience in representing the depth and ingenuity of Oskar's bad faith. He is especially forthcoming on this score in *Peeling the Onion*, which opens with admissions that at twelve "he still loved sitting in his mother's lap," and that he shares his hero's "temptation to camouflage [himself] in the third person" (1). As we have seen, Oskar insists on using "virgin" paper for his autobiography; Grass himself laments that "writing after Auschwitz" had shame, shame on every white page as its prerequisite" (*Two States* 107). It was the narrator of *The Tin Drum*, Grass declares quite openly, who "compelled me to haunt the misty corners of my early years" (*Peeling* 312). Like Oskar, then, Grass is an autobiographical writer caught up in competing compulsions to reveal and to conceal the same dark truths about his involvement in the Second World War.

Grass' advanced education in bad faith seems to have commenced in a POW camp in 1945 when his American captors presented him with photographs of the pathetic Jewish victims, dead and nearly dead, found by the allies at Bergen-Belsen and Ravensbrück. "I couldn't believe it," Grass recalls, "Germans don't do that"; and he dismissed the pictures as "Propaganda. Pure propaganda." But as if to concede the very point that "the crazy Americans" forced him to address, Grass responded "with questions about [their] country's contemptible treatment of the 'niggers'" (195-97). To be sure, his riposte is not an unequivocal avowal of guilt; but the clearly implied equivalence between German and American transgressions certainly points in that direction. Nor was this to be his last exculpatory gesture along these lines. Years later, when Grass was playing in a jazz trio in a Düsseldorf restaurant, Louis Armstrong

appeared out of nowhere and actually sat in on a set. "The honor" that Armstrong conferred, Grass declares, "means more to me than all the prizes I later won, including the most prized of all" (the 1999 Nobel Prize in Literature). "Even if this monumental meeting were not to have taken place in bland reality," he goes on, "it retains a figurative meaning for me: always within reach, trumpet gold, interpretation-free, above suspicion" (333). His insistence on the event's stable, univocal significance notwithstanding, we can hardly fail to see that Armstrong's good will had momentous significance for Grass because it could be read as a gesture of solidarity from a famous representative of his accuser's victims, American blacks, and for that as a welcome counterbalance to the postwar affiliation between Americans and the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust.

Of course, Grass protests so ornately about the "interpretation-free" status of the Armstrong episode that we must allow for the possibility that he does so on purpose, as oblique testimony to the depth of his penetration into the furtive operations of bad faith. To entertain this possibility is to be reminded of Oskar Matzerath, whose professions of innocence and guilt, I have argued, are invariably so fraught with ambiguity as to suggest that he has taken refuge in cultivated moral indeterminacy. Grass quite evidently recognizes the inevitable attraction of such subtle ruses in a world utterly in thrall to guilt, so much so that he dramatizes their authority in Oskar's autobiography, and knowingly simulates them in his own.¹⁵ Patrick O'Neill has issued a warning against the interpretation of "Oskar's evasiveness when it comes to matters of personal guilt as symptomatic of an obsessively guilty conscience." To do so, O'Neill argues, "is to fall spectacularly into the hermeneutic mantrap that is the central characteristic of *The Tin Drum* as a whole: namely, that we take seriously stories that are quite literally entirely impossible to believe" (35). While perfectly apt, O'Neill's argument invites acquiescence in the retreat to moral ambiguity that Oskar cultivates so assiduously in his narrative, and that Grass acknowledges—and may even obliquely simulate—in *Peeling the Onion*. The retreat to such knowing indeterminacy bears witness to the desperate ingenuity of bad faith denial.

As I have suggested, Grass' representation and implied critique of such strategies are grounded in searching moral self-scrutiny. He recognizes his own resort to "the cleverest artistic infidelities" in his lifelong grappling with the anguish of German history ("Literature" 255). He

understands from experience that unbearable realities “can be stylized away,” and takes a stand “against this time-honoured means of dealing with the past” (qtd. in Hollington 18). In his early work, he admits, “I practiced the art of evasion with all the skill I’d picked up along the way; I deliberately circumvented obvious abysses, had no qualms about making excuses, and chose material that celebrated stasis: fiction nurtured on Kafka and suffering from anorexia, drama reveling in hide-and-seek language, wordplay that led merrily to more wordplay” (*Peeling* 415).¹⁶ He pokes fun at his postwar attraction to “what passed for existentialism at the time,” which “could be worn as a mask becoming to us, the survivors of the ‘dark years,’ as one of the circumlocutions for the period of Nazi hegemony had it: it fostered tragic poses. . . . Heidegger furnished quotes for the apocalyptic mood.” A cigarette “dangling from the lower lip” was *de rigueur*, and to contemplate death “while smoking with friends was considered *bon ton*” (293). The existential debates dragged on for hours into the night, he recalls, but gave scant attention to “the crimes of the war that lay behind us” (304).

His own youthful experience informs Grass’ later satire of high-sounding artistic and philosophical evasions. In *The Tin Drum*, for example, Oskar adopts the view that he “is descended in a straight line” from ancient Germanic tribes whose habits of “pillage and destruction” set the trajectory for all subsequent history in the region (395). Quite evidently, imagining himself mere flotsam in the dark, irresistible tide of history eases his sense of personal entanglement in more proximate horrors. Historical determinism is also at play in *The Rat*, in which Oskar’s film about the apocalyptic obliteration of humanity is a source of oblique moral consolation. The end “comes as inexorable fate,” the narrator confides. “No one has willed it, no one has prevented it. Questions of guilt are not asked” (336). There is kindred jubilation earlier in the novel when the human source of the catastrophe is similarly obscured. “No one asks any longer where, what, and when / a mistake is made. / Nor does anyone ask about / guilt or guilty parties” (168). It is an index to the desperation of the need for relief that imagination runs to such extremes in its pursuit. Death and destruction are embraced on the promise not of redemption, but of the mere obfuscation of moral responsibility.

It is against this background, I believe, that we should approach the “hermeneutical mantrap” set by the elusive narrator of *The Tin Drum*.

Oskar's scrupulous indeterminacy mimics the sophisticated convolution of much modern European thought, which issues so frequently in the insistence that we must defer judgment in the face of proliferating uncertainty. Grass is clearly aware of such trends, and just as clearly suspicious of them. Oskar's insanity is manifestly a moral subterfuge; so, Grass suggests, are "his feigned feelings of guilt," which he displays with such extravagance as to draw attention away from "his real transgressions" (*Tin Drum* 27). At the novel's end, as he contemplates "his inevitable discharge from the mental hospital," Oskar anticipates that he will be stalked and tormented by the personification of his guilt, "the Witch who blackens every confessional with her shadow." "Where's the Witch, black as pitch?" the children sang when he was a child. The dreadful accusations persist: "You're to blame. And you are too. You're most to blame, You! you! you!" Is this guilt "feigned," or is it the genuine article? Is Oskar pulling a fast one when he cries out, "now and forever, she is in front of me, coming closer"? (*Tin Drum* 588–89). It hardly matters; for either way, fake or real, his expressions of guilt fail utterly to win his release into morally unencumbered states of mind. Perhaps his evasions have left him unsure about the reality of his moral condition; but they have not freed him from the inexorable reflex of bad faith denial that burdens his entire narrative.



One of the strong incentives toward this comparative project was my perception of abundant and striking similarities between Clemens and Grass. Both arose from modest backgrounds that were strongly divided along religious and political lines. Both responded as children to romantic images of heroism in war; both had profoundly disenchanting experiences with the reality of military conflict. Both were as youngsters made witness to humanity at its worst—Clemens to race slavery, Grass to Nazism and anti-Semitism—and both were initially rather unmoved by what they beheld. Their moral reconstruction would develop gradually over time. Both wrote books that go to the heart of their nation's guilt, and both were among the very first major artists in their countries to do so. Both are international celebrities and recipients of the highest honors. Both produced a substantial body of fiction unified by a shared place and time—Grass "the Danzig trilogy," Clemens "the matter of

Hannibal”—in which the boundary between history and fiction is obscured. Both write eloquently about childhood, and gravitate to a child’s point of view on the world. Both imagine youthful heroes who draw back from morally compromised adult realities. Both were satirical of the Romantic myths—of German racial purity and supremacy, and of what Clemens calls the southern “Sir Walter Scott disease”—that form a cover for the petty hypocrisy and greed of ordinary people. Both were entangled in the bad faith at large in their cultures, and that they variously acknowledge and interpret in their writing. Finally, they are strikingly at one in their emergent taxonomies of the strategies of denial. Determinism in one form or another is in both their works a common avenue of retreat from onerous moral responsibility. Philosophical posturing—whether in the form of solipsism, nihilism, moral relativism, or existentialism—is another. A range of psychological explanations—multiple personalities, insanity, deranged dreams—are also found in both, as are religious justifications and variations on “the lie of silent assertion.” In short, Clemens and Grass concur that humans burdened with extraordinary guilt are extraordinarily resourceful in devising ways to deny, explain away, or otherwise palliate their moral discomfiture.

The Tin Drum testifies to the paradox that denial in bad faith is implicitly an admission of guilt: otherwise, whence the denial? Günter Grass quite evidently knows this, just as he knows that his own writing, like Oskar’s, is an ambiguous “art of drumming back the past” (474) in which impulses to reveal and to conceal compete for mastery.¹⁷ Clemens’s writing about Hannibal and slavery betrays the same paradox, though not—as the word “betray” is intended to suggest—with Grass’ high degree of self-consciousness. Thinking to have “some fun” with his superstitious companion, Huck plants a dead snake near Jim’s blanket. When the snake’s living mate bites and nearly kills Jim, Huck hides the evidence “clear away amongst the bushes; for I warn’t going to let Jim find out it was all my fault, not if I could help it” (80–81). The snakes linger on the margins of Huck’s consciousness for a while, but the novel seems to forget his very telling act of bad faith evasion, about which no more is heard. Like the Bombay section of *Following the Equator*, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* gives evidence of similarly contrary impulses to explore and then to draw the veil over emergent examples of bad faith evasion.¹⁸ And in “Which Was It?” where the reality of white guilt is finally made explicit in the accusations of Jasper, the ex-slave, Clemens finds that he cannot go on, and abandons the project.

What broader historical circumstances, we may ask, contribute to this sharp difference in writers otherwise so similar in their treatment of bad faith? How shall we account for the fact that Clemens is relatively blind to the moral evasiveness on display in his life and writing, while Grass, by contrast, is acutely aware of the same thing. Cultural changes brought about over time are surely part of an answer. Thanks to the work of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, with whom Clemens had scant familiarity, but whose ideas were formative in twentieth-century intellectual life, it is little wonder that Grass saw clearly what his American predecessor only glimpsed in fits and starts.¹⁹ Nor were the giants of intellectual history working in a vacuum. Their ideas have flourished in a century of such relentless violence and cruelty that the remnants of Enlightenment optimism have all but given way to a much darker view of human nature and human possibility in which guilt and the complex dynamics of its evasion figure in ever bolder relief. Clemens had no vocabulary to describe bad faith; Grass strains to find words free of its influence.

Romantic illusions about war are the first casualties in the lives of young soldiers ("What like a bullet can undeceive!" Melville observes in his requiem on the battle of Shiloh ["Shiloh" 63]). Clemens and Grass were survivors on the losing side of major military conflicts, and both suffered deep personal disenchantment as the result. Both in time renounced their earlier affiliations with discredited regimes. But though Clemens trained briefly on the Confederate side, he fled in 1861 to the Nevada Territory where he observed the dire proceedings from a great distance. And though he never forgave himself for his cowardice, his fleeting wartime involvement certainly smoothed the way to his subsequent reconstruction as a northern Republican, and thereby to the winning side of a national conflagration best remembered for having freed the slaves. For many Americans, the great human sacrifices of the Civil War served to mitigate, if not totally to obscure, the weight of the crimes against the millions liberated at last from bondage. It is tribute to Clemens's moral acuity that he suffered more deeply than most of his contemporaries the guilt that has continued to prey on the national memory of the Civil War.

Grass' experience of the Second World War, by contrast, confronted him with moral challenges of greater gravity from which he had fewer avenues of moral retreat. As a young soldier he was keenly com-

mitted to a cause which he served at great danger to life and limb. Once he was confronted with the whole, terrible truth about Hitler, Nazism, and the Holocaust, his disillusionment was so complete and shattering that it undermined his capacity for trust in virtually everything, himself included. Nor was there any place to hide. The entire world was watching in horror; and where the Americans in 1865 could take moral comfort in the re-election of Lincoln, the martyred liberator of the slaves, the Germans in 1945 could hardly deny—as Grass has observed—that “Hitler’s seizure of power” was something they had “wanted and supported” (“On the Right” 141). No one had been freed; Jews in unthinkable numbers had been humiliated, tortured, and murdered. Resistance to the totalitarian regime had been feeble at best; there was no tradition of open dissent, no *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and no *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* to look back upon with some measure of moral reassurance. There was nothing but a deep sense of betrayal—by history, by the Reich, and, most bitterly, by himself—and remorseless conscience evermore in flight to the ingenious but transparently factitious consolations of bad faith.

Grass admits in *Peeling the Onion* that he was driven to tell his story, but labored in vain for years until, at last, “Oskar was allowed to call things I had passed over in silence by their names, to put into words what I had suppressed as burdensome” (270). But of course it was part and parcel of the story’s truth that the impulse to tell it competed with an equally strong impulse to banish it altogether from sight and mind. This is the elusive truth dramatized in *The Tin Drum*. It would have been much easier, Grass acknowledges, “if the massive weight of the German past and hence my own could have somehow been ignored. But it stood in the way. It tripped me up. There was no getting around it. . . . Words were needed. And a first sentence was still missing” (415–16). The words finally came in 1956. Grass was in Paris with his wife. Echoes of the Algerian War reverberated through the city as they “sat in cinemas watching Soviet tanks—which reminded us of the tanks we had seen in Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz not so many years before—on the streets of Budapest.” It was there, he recalls, as war raged all around him, that the first sentence of his novel, Oskar’s inaugural gesture in bad faith, finally came to him— “Granted: I am an inmate at a mental institution . . .” (*Peeling* 421).

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NOTES

1. Shklar observes that “because cruelty is made easier by hypocrisy and self-deception, they are bound to stand high on the list of vices that begins with cruelty” (19).

2. Zaccara has usefully linked the humorist’s autobiographical dictations to the Freudian “talking cure” (101–21).

3. The comment was originally published *New York American*, 26 May 1907. For a fully elaborated argument on the role of the unconscious in Clemens’s creativity, see Robinson, “Unconscious.”

4. Clemens, of course, published his major works during the so-called “nadir of American race relations.” Grass’s first and most influential novel, *The Tin Drum*, was published in 1959, a time when Germans were still inclined to regard themselves more as the victims than the perpetrators of the recent war. Until the mid-1960s, Judt observes, “any suggestion that Germany, and especially the German armed forces, had behaved in ways that precipitated or justified their suffering was angrily dismissed. The preferred self-image of Adenauer’s Germany was that of a victim” (270).

5. See especially *In Bad Faith*.

6. For a fuller discussion of both “My First Lie and How I Got Out of It” and Clemens’s account of his experiences in Bombay, see Chapter 1 of *The Author-Cat*.

7. For more on the history of the composition of “No. 44,” see Gibson’s reconstruction in *The Mysterious Stranger*, 9–10.

8. Buruma’s is a generally forgiving assessment, though he concludes: “There are certain aspects of the past that should be precisely remembered, as Grass was always the first to point out, in anger, and now, one should hope, in sorrow” (85). For another, equally searching and balanced perspective, see Ash.

9. Cf. also “By a Rough Estimate,” in which Grass declares: “Born in 1927, I belong to a generation that although it may not have directly participated in the German crime—the genocide of six million Jews—bears to this day the responsibility for it and is neither able nor willing to forget it” (152).

10. Cf. also “What Shall We Tell Our Children?” where he describes “the German guilt that has lived on from generation to generation and must remain forever indelible” (76).

11. Kramer argues that in the half-century and more since the end of World War II, the “Germans have been trying to talk their way out of an unutterable past and back into what they like to call History. . . . They want to resolve a duty to remember and a longing to forget, as if duty and desire were the thesis and antithesis of a dialectic of history” (257).

12. Cf. Hollington: “Oskar is . . . a strategically-placed instrument for uncovering the bad faith of petit-bourgeois ‘innocence’” (43).

13. For further discussion of morally telling verbal ambiguity in *The Tin Drum*, see Boyers 177–81.

14. Oskar comes back to the scene at the breakwater much later in the novel (“In the Clothes Cupboard” 487–97), where he reveals even more about its formative significance in his moral life.

15. Mason’s early but still valuable monograph is very insightful on this critical issue.

16. In *Cat and Mouse*, a friendly critic counsels Pilenz: “Yes, yes, there was too much Kafka in your first poetic efforts and short stories” (136).

17. Cf. Grass’ essay, “What Shall We Tell Our Children”: “A writer . . . is someone who writes against the passage of time” (87).

18. For a full development of this critical perspective, see my essay, “The Sense of Disorder in Pudd’nhead Wilson.”

19. See Brahm, Jr. and Robinson.

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