

An “Innocent” Desire: Food in Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*

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Abstract:

In the original English translation of Günter Grass’ *The Tin Drum*, the “Schwarze Köchin” was translated as “witch, black as pitch.” Breon Mitchell’s new 2009 translation reinstates the “Black Cook” to her rightful place as the inescapable terror that haunts Oskar Matzerath throughout his life. For English-language readers, her reappearance helps to emphasize the importance of food in Grass’ novel. This essay explores food’s multifaceted role in *The Tin Drum*; it is by turns a comforter, a tempter, and a murderer. Ultimately, however, it stands as a warning to the reader, as food’s presumed innocence, its everyday banality, belies its potential to destroy.

Keywords: *The Tin Drum*, Günter Grass, Breon Mitchell, translation, food, death, sex, ersatz joy, innocence, desire, temptation, comfort, the Black Cook

In Breon Mitchell’s 2009 English edition of *The Tin Drum*, translated in cooperation with Grass himself, there is a set of translator’s notes at the end of the story, a sort of postscript for the reader. In them, Mitchell discusses the many hurdles of translating such a rich, multifaceted novel, as well as the differences between his translation and the previous. One of the many differences between the two is the return of the Black Cook. In the original translation she is the “witch, black as pitch” (Grass 573), thereby losing all connection with food and consumption. This is a pity because food plays an enormous role in *The Tin Drum*, and it is a constant throughout Oskar’s life. This, in and of itself, is unremarkable - everyone needs to eat, after all - but it goes beyond simply what someone has for dinner. Frankly, there are too many references to food for them to be catalogued in an essay this short, and, confounding the issue further, the role of food is mercurial - by turns a comforter, a tempter, a murderer - and refuses easy categorisation. However, the underlying theme is as old as Adam and Eve. In a

novel chronicling some of the most grotesque periods in recent European history, food stands as a warning. Just as in the garden of Eden, food appears innocent - what could be more harmless than an apple? - when, in truth, it has a several sins to its name, not the least of which is the original. Like the “innocent” neighbourhood children that force Oskar to choke down a soup made of brick and piss, food’s apparent innocence, its very banality, belies its potential for destruction.

However, while this difference in translation may explain the lack of literature in English, there does not seem to be much available in German either. While Volker Neuhaus, in his text “...über Menschen als Tiere, die kochen können,” notes that, in the topsy-turvy world of *The Tin Drum*, “...können Kochen und Essen auch töten” (17), his commentary on food, much like that of M.K. Sosnoski’s in “Oskar’s Hungry Witch,” is mostly used to support of his analysis of sexuality in the novel. Food, in and of itself, is not the central theme³⁰.

Food plays a central role in Oskar’s early life, from his mother’s conception in a potato field - under potato-coloured skirts, while Anna Koljaizcek eats potatoes - to the geography of his childhood, which shuttled between “a grocery store, a bakery, and a vegetable shop” (Grass 289). Oskar’s earliest sentient memory - at least, according to him - is listening to his mother Agnes and his presumptive father Matzerath discuss his future. Matzerath wants him to take over the family grocery store when he grows up - an idea Oskar finds so repugnant that he forces his body to stop growing at the age of three (it is perhaps worth noting that his plan is brought about through the help of a can of vegetables and several bottles of raspberry syrup and that, as he lies on the floor, he

³⁰ Tom Ratekin also discusses food in “Eat Your Fish! Eating and Perversion in *The Tin Drum*.” However, as with Sosnoski and Neuhaus, our approaches are dissimilar.

wonders “whether it was Oskar’s blood or the raspberries that smelled so sweet and soporific” (51)).

Despite his distaste for the family business, food continues to be associated with comfort and safety throughout Oskar’s life - possibly, if one cares to psychoanalyse what is arguably the most unreliable narrator in the history of literature, because of these early childhood connotations. After all, what we know as children maintains its hold on us throughout our lives, whether we want it to or not. The two most notable examples of the comfort of food are his neighbour, Mother Truczinski, and his grandmother, Anna Koljaizcek.

Mother Truczinski is described several times throughout the novel as a drinker of ersatz coffee and a maker of wonderful potato pancakes. She is one of the few people in the novel that Oskar is fond of, and it is to her he goes when he “felt the need for human company” (Grass 160) after his mother dies. However, when Mother Truczinski dies, Oskar refers to her eating habits - namely barley coffee and potato pancakes (369) and her preference for Vitello margarine (379) - rather than her person, as though these comforting foods were, in fact, what made up her comforting character.

Aside from his mother, Oskar’s grandmother Anna Koljaizcek is his favourite person. Under her four potato-coloured skirts Oskar finds peace and solace. Her skirts are “the only destination [Oskar] felt held any real promise” (Grass 553); and under them, as he is constantly telling the reader, his grandmother smells of slightly rancid butter. In one strangely touching episode Oskar imagines his whole family - the dead and the living - gathered under those potato-coloured skirts, inside his grandmother’s “butter tub” (331), happy in a way they never were in life. For a character with whom it is nearly impossible

to empathise, Oskar's longing for the peace found in the rancid butter smell of Anna Koljaizcek's skirts is particularly striking; a longing for certainty and security - no matter its smell - is a very human desire.

This association of food and comfort does not end at old women either: what woman does Oskar love who is not ascribed an association with food? Maria, his first love, smells of vanilla, Roswitha the Italian somnambulist of cinnamon and crushed cloves; his mother has her lingering association with grilled eel; and even Sister Dorothea, with her vinegar-scented room, is described to the reader in terms of smell. Notably, Frau Greff, with whom Oscar sleeps, but for whom he does not care, is given no such smell.

However, Oskar is not unique in this association. One of the most memorable episodes in *The Tin Drum* is The Onion Cellar. It is an obvious but still heartbreaking metaphor. In The Onion Cellar, food is not only associated with a sense of comfort and relief but is the necessary physical link between a person and their emotions. Patrons frequent The Onion Cellar not to buy beer or eat *Currywurst* but to cut up onions and be forced to cry. In doing so, they finally release all the shame, guilt, grief, and horror brought on either by their own lives or by the war. Without the onions these people cannot express anything. "It's like", Oskar tells us, "trying to lay an egg: you push and push..." (Grass 501), but nothing comes out until the onions burn their eyes.

While food does help to comfort the patrons of The Onion Cellar, it loses the innocence of its association with Mother Truzcinski and Anna Koljaizcek. The Onion Cellar is a for-profit outfit, its owner calculating just what his patrons need - and charging them outrageously for it. The Onion Cellar is one several overpriced nightclubs,

including The Ravioli Room, and Paprika (Grass 498), almost all of whom are named for food. It is in The Onion Cellar as well that, when patrons find themselves on the brink of an orgy, Oskar leads them away like the Pied Piper, beginning with the innocent “Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, Baker’s man,” which slowly transforms into the more insidious “Better start running, the Black Cook’s coming!” (510), twisting a moment of childish nostalgia into something fiercer. In *The Tin Drum*, after all, food is more often associated with darker desires than with comfort and security.

Though in The Onion Cellar, food is the physical link necessary for characters to obtain their desire (in this case for relief), elsewhere in the novel food is a manifestation of the desire itself. Throughout the story, food - more specifically sweet food - assumes the role of sex. One of the earliest examples of this is when Oskar, his mother, and his two fathers go to The Starfish for coffee and cake. His mother wants a third helping of five-layer cake and, when she gets it, “gave Matzerath a bite, fed Jan, satisfied both her men, then crammed the sugary sweet wedge spoonful by spoonful into her mouth” (Grass 98). The cake is a very literal representation of her relationship with both men, and the line between gluttony and adultery is blurred, food and sex becoming one and the same. Agnes, this passages implies, is eating too much (after all, she is constantly trying to slim down) as well as sleeping around too much. To repent for her double helping of sin, she goes to confession, which Oskar later remembers as her “pouring her grocery-wife sins into Father Wiehnke’s ear, just as she used to pour sugar into blue pound and half-pound sacks” (306). Her supposed sins are sugar-based and, in the end, rot her away like a cavity.

Another, more lengthy, example of sugar-for-sex is Oskar's visits to Frau Scheffler, the baker's wife who teaches him to read. Despite her attempts to have him tackle more traditionally edifying works, Oskar's favourite authors remain Rasputin and Goethe. It is the former, with all his women in black stockings, who sets things off. Frau Scheffler is childless and, the reader comes to learn, not very well attended to by her husband. "If only Herr Scheffler had occasionally withdrawn his fingers from the flour ... Gretchen would gladly have been kneaded, rolled, brushed, and baked by him," confides Oskar (Grass 81). As he did not, Frau Scheffler satisfies herself with living vicariously through Rasputin's orgies and, once reading lessons are over for the day, eating pastries. She brings sweets of all kinds, offering Oskar "love tarts and honey almond cakes ... and meringue kisses with whipped cream, so sweet, so sweet" (82). Even the pastries' names - love tarts, kisses, cream - shamelessly allude to their true role. Oskar, who has no desire for sex at that point, forces himself to vomit up all the sweets afterwards - they hold no interest for him.

Later, however, Oskar takes these reading lessons to heart and seduces Nurse Gertrud with cakes, despite her reluctance. "How gay young nurses can be when you bring them sweets" (Grass 430) he notes. And, indeed, when he takes her out for cake it is "one slice for me and three for her" (431). Oskar is not the partner of her choice, but Nurse Gertrud craves satisfaction nonetheless - so he provides her with an ersatz joy.

No exception to the sugary rule is Oskar's own experience with Maria - though perhaps bitter-sweet is a better word both in terms of flavour and outcome. In this case, food is both a manifestation of sex as well as a means of accomplishing the deed - a mixture of Frau Scheffler and *The Onion Cellar*. In an ongoing, and wildly unsubtle,

visual metaphor, Oskar and Maria spend one summer playing with fizz powder - a powder in woodruff, orange, or raspberry flavour, which carbonates drinks, fizzing on contact with liquid - which Maria holds in the palm of her hand and Oskar causes to bubble with his own spit. This game soon accelerates: it moves from the beach to the bedroom, the fizz powder from Maria's palm to her navel, and Oskar from raspberries to mushrooms. The subsequent loss of Oskar's virginity is couched entirely in food-based metaphors. Arguably, however, this is a case of food-as-comfort rather than food-as-sin for Oskar, despite his cornucopia of faults, loves Maria, is truly moved by the experience, and is "forced to defend it as the only true and possible love" (262) - despite the fact that, since Maria is said to be asleep during the act, this only true and possible love is, in fact, rape.

Sex is not the only desire in *The Tin Drum*, however. Even stronger than sex is the desire for death. And food, as always, has its part to play. Much like Luzie's transformation from girl to Black Cook, food shows us how the banal can become the monstrous, much like life under Nazi rule, and how the monstrous can become banal, like life after Nazi rule. Late in the novel there is a brief detour into the life of Greff, Oskar's greengrocer neighbour, whom Oskar becomes better acquainted with once he starts sleeping with Greff's wife. At the end of the affair, after years as a scout leader, Greff's homosexuality is at last found out by the Nazi party, and he kills himself. One of food's many victims, Greff kills himself with potatoes. 75 kilograms (minus 100 grams) of the world's most boring food becomes the means of his elegant and perfectly-staged exit. The very tuber that kept Greff's vegetable shop afloat, and therefore kept him alive, is what kills him in the end.

Not long after that, Oskar murders his presumptive father by means of a Nazi party pin turned bonbon. When the Russians arrive in their cellar, Oskar wants to be “rid of the bonbon” (Grass 375) and passes it back to its true owner, Matzerath, a man who “turned feelings into soups” (386). Unfortunately, Matzerath, “in spite of his often-tested imagination as a cook ... could think of no better hiding place than his mouth” (375); though perhaps it is *because* of his imagination as a cook that ingestion is his first thought. Either way, he swallows his old Nazi beliefs and their sharp metal point chokes him to death.

However, the most violent and passionate death in the novel is, of course, that of Oskar’s mother Agnes. After Matzerath forces her to witness eel-fishing on Good Friday - in which eels are pulled out of a rotting horse’s head thrown again and again into the ocean - Agnes is struck by inspiration. In a turn at once brilliant and cruel, Agnes Matzerath “driven by some mysterious urge ... started devouring fish” (Grass 146). She eats fish like a woman possessed until, finally, she - and her unborn fetus - dies. Oskar surmises that his mother wanted “to dissolve her triangular relationship in such a way that Matzerath, whom she may have hated, would bear the guilt for her death” while her lover Jan Bronski could believe she sacrificed herself for him (148). Oskar may not be far wrong in this, as Agnes’s weapon of choice is food - Matzerath’s greatest passion.

And then, finally, there is Luzie, the fox-faced girl who becomes Oskar’s dreaded Black Cook. When the reader first meets Luzie, she is eating a sausage sandwich and watching her brothers be inducted into the Dusters gang (Grass 357). A few pages later, she betrays the gang to their deaths, and there she is again with another sandwich, her face

a chewing triangle, doll, Black Cook, devouring sausages and skin, growing skinnier as she fed, more ravenous, more triangular, more doll-like - a look that left its mark upon me ... [h]ow long will it chew away inside me, chewing sausages, skin, and men, and smiling. (362)

She is there one more time at the Dusters' trial, urging the boys to jump to their deaths while she sits on Satan's lap, who "tempted her desire by handing her a sausage sandwich" (367). Luzie, described as a virgin (a measurement of female innocence apparently so entrenched that even Grass, for all his subversiveness, could not break free of it), is an innocent, whose childish desires become so twisted that she is no longer recognisable, taking on the face of the villainous old hag, the Black Cook (because what says 'evil' more than a woman who has lost her looks to time?). Like food itself, Luzie is an innocent with the power to destroy.

But just who is the Black Cook? The Black Cook, the ravenous spectre at the heart of *The Tin Drum*, embodies all the horror - and the black irony - contained in humanity and its insatiable need to consume: for, when there is nothing left to consume, we consume ourselves. As with any desire, the more one has, the more one wants. One more sandwich, one more fish, one more onion, one more piece of cake, one more game of skat before the end... As Oskar points out, "[t]oo much of any brew will make you retch at times, then turn sweet again, too sweet, so sweet it makes one relish retching" (Grass 470). And thus we eat ourselves to death.

In the end, food in *The Tin Drum* stands in direct opposition to the apple of the original sin. The apple came from the tree of knowledge and opened Eve's eyes. Food in the *The Tin Drum* tempts, to be sure, but its temptations are those of blindness and ignorance. Even when it is associated with comfort, such as in the case of Mother Trzcinski or Anna Koljaizcek, it is the temptation of returning to the womb, of

forgetting, of being taken care of, that is alluring. Perhaps Klepp, Oskar's spaghetti-slurping friend, is right and there is "a wolfish hunger lurking behind each of the world's sorrows" (Grass 489), compelling us to try to do the impossible, to fill the "void that nothing, not even those vast quantities of fried, boiled, pickled, and smoked fish could ever fill" (147). If food is offered to the readers of *The Tin Drum* as a warning against dangers of unbridled desire, it is a warning that the characters of the book are not privy to. They continue lusting after more - for surely *more* will fill up the void. For, much in the way food in *The Tin Drum* is a substitute for sex, so too is desire is a substitute for joy. But, even then, the novels offers little hope: when Oskar *does* find joy, he wonders if it is not just "a substitute, for joy too may be a substitute, may only come by way of substitution, joy always ersatz joy..."(423).

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