

Peace and the “Power of Poetry”: In Defense of Günter Grass

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[Agenda](#)

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It should come as no surprise that from Germany – the “land of poets and thinkers”—a most powerful message warning of threats to world peace should appear in the guise of a poem. Nor should anyone marvel at the fact that this poem has created a political earthquake. Günter Grass, a famed Nobel Prize writer who is best known for his novel, *The Tin Drum*, published a poem on April 4, 2012 in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* warning of an Israeli first strike against Iran and its consequences. The piece, entitled, “What must be said,” provoked a barrage of criticism on one side and just as loud a chorus of applause on the other. (1)

The critics leveled their accusations in language not usually showcased in the country’s establishment press. Some, like literature Pope Marcel Reich-Ranicki, charged that the ageing Grass wanted deliberately “to attack the Jewish state,” with the aim of unleashing “a big scandal, to attract attention which an author otherwise doesn’t receive.” American lawyer and author Louis Begley agreed with Ranicki’s judgment that it was not a poem; it “is no more a poem than a porcelain urinal could become a work of art, just because [French Dadaist artist] Marcel Duchamp decided to exhibit it as a water fountain,” he wrote, and concluded that “the real scandal lies in the fact that Grass, by deploying the ‘nuclear power’ of his name was able to get a respected German newspaper to publish this cheap prose text that he composed as a poem.” Or, as author Sibylle Lewitscharoff put it: “If Grass’s text is supposed to be a poem, then have I, with the help of two or three melodious farts after having eaten a trout, composed a new St. Matthews Passion.”

Criticism from Israelis, at home and abroad, as well as from pro-Zionist spokesmen, attacked the writer as an anti-Semite, a charge he had predicted in the poem itself would be unleashed. Thus Robert B. Goldmann suggests that “the old man” Grass is reflecting anti-Semitic sentiments rife in and characteristic of Europe; similar views appeared in Israeli newspapers like *Maariv*, *Yediot Ahronot*, and *Makor Rishon*. One Israeli writer Gil Yaron condemned the piece as “a self-satisfying, moralizing, Eurocentric position,” historian Tom Segev called it “egocentric and pathetic,” while the Israeli Embassy in Berlin issued a statement saying: “What must be said is that it belongs to European tradition to accuse the Jews of ritual murder just before the Passover.” Following that, the Israeli Interior Minister announced he would brand Grass a persona non grata and refuse him entry into the country.

Why all the clamor, and in so decidedly unpoetical form? There are two levels on which to answer, as anyone versed in that questionable discipline known as “literary criticism” knows: there is the content and the form. Frank Schirrmacher, one of the publishers of the German daily of record, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, explained in an OpEd, that a

poem differs from an editorial in that it never explicitly states its message, whereas the latter always does. In fact, most of the detractors of Grass's poem complained that it was not a poem, but rather a commentary, and should never have been passed off as a work of art.

The content of the poem is easy to detect since it is not clothed in the usual metaphorical language of poetry. The points Grass made in the poem can be paraphrased as follows: Israel is claiming the alleged right to a first strike against Iran on grounds it may be building an atom bomb. Such a first strike could lead to the decimation of the Iranian people. Though kept secret, Israel itself has had a nuclear potential for years, which is beyond control because it is not subject to inspections.

The silence surrounding these facts is a troubling lie, which, if defied or ignored, provokes the charge of "anti-Semitism." Now Germany, itself questioned about its own grave crimes in the past, has delivered another submarine to Israel, which is capable of delivering totally devastating [i.e. nuclear] warheads against a land which has no proven atomic bombs; the fear that it might have them or be seeking them is however taken as proof. Why has the poet kept his silence until now? Is it because of his own blemished past, he asks, that he thinks he could not expect Israel to accept these facts as truth? Why does he speak out now and say that nuclear power Israel "endangers an already fragile world peace"? Because tomorrow may be too late, and because Germans, already burdened, could be delivering material for a crime whose consequences are predictable, and therefore its complicity could not be argued away after the fact. The reason for breaking the silence now is that the poet is sick of the West's hypocrisy, and hopes his words might allow others to break their silence, and to move them to demand that the cause of a recognizable danger renounce the use of force and at the same time insist that both governments allow unhindered and permanent controls by an international authority of Israel's atomic potential as well as Iran's nuclear installations. This is the only way to help Palestinians and Israelis, everyone in this madness-occupied region, and all the rest.

Anyone who has followed developments in the region, especially relating to the Iranian nuclear program, will recognize that there is almost nothing factually in error here. The only qualification, which some military experts were quick to point out, is that Grass seems to suggest that the German-supplied submarines could be used to launch nuclear bombs on Iran in a first strike, whereas such submarine launches are designed for a second strike.

That said, the gut of his argument is clear and on the mark, as many of his defenders have detailed. These include emphatically authoritative voices from Germany, from Israel, and from the Jewish community abroad. Among them are Evelyn Hecht-Galinski (daughter of the former president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany), Felicia Langer, German Jewish publisher Abraham Melzer, Israeli author Ari Avnery, German journalist Jakob Augstein, as well as exile Iranian Mohssen Massarat in the *Financial Times Deutschland*, Gilad Atzmon, Tariq Ali, and many many others.

Those who attacked the poem's content did so by simple denial, for example, by denying Israeli intentions to preemptively bomb Iran's nuclear facilities, even though both Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Washington and Defense Minister Ehud Barak in Berlin recently declared that to be their policy, unless Iran's entire nuclear program were otherwise dismantled or mothballed. Or, critics complained that Grass was placing Iran and Israel on the same moral level, a charge which assumes the Islamic Republic is the source of

all evil. In this context, Iranian President Ahmadinejad's oft quoted and misconstrued threats to "wipe the Zionist entity off the map" are cited as proof. (2) Another point of criticism was that Grass lied when, in remarks after the poem had appeared, he accused the German press of being so politically correct as to forbid any debate on Israeli foreign policy. Here, several rebutted that, no, on the contrary, anyone is allowed to criticize settlement policy, human rights abuses against Palestinians etc. And this is true enough. But that one might accuse *nuclear power Israel* of constituting a danger to world peace was indeed taboo, as Grass had stated. (3) The majority of his critics attacked Grass on a very personal level, lambasting him for having become a member of the Waffen SS at the end of the war, and having kept silent about it for decades (a point he refers to in the poem as his blemished past). Those focusing on this fact attempted to offer biographical explanations for Grass's alleged anti-Semitism and psychological elucidations of his political warning in the poem.

So much for the content of the poem. That it did indeed break a taboo is a fact, documented by the unprecedented public debate throughout April about the very content, in an unending series of press features, OpEds, and TV talk shows, not to mention blogs.

Now, to the form. To be frank, and in all due respect, it is not much of a poem. Reich-Ranicki went off the deep end in calling it "revolting," but he was right to point out (as the professional critic he is) that it lacks rhyme, rhythm, poetic vocabulary, and melody. (He declined to mention that much of contemporary poetry displays the same lack of traditional features.) With the exception of a few images, he thought, like "with my last ink," which is "a symbol" and therefore "poetical," the work does not qualify as poetry.

But Grass is a published poet, many of whose works have earned the praise of Reich-Ranicki among others; in short, the man knows the difference between prose and poetry, and knows what good poetry is. So why did he compose this?

Some detractors inadvertently gave a clue to the answer. Louis Begley wrote that he "would have dispensed with Günter Grass's views ... with a shrug of the shoulders if Grass had presented them as an editorial in any newspaper that considered them ready for publication. In a democracy it is fair to allow, discuss, and demolish even unqualified and malicious political opinions." But, he goes on, "Grass disguises his highly provocative assumption that 'nuclear power Israel endangers an already fragile world peace' as a poem and serves it to us, without mentioning that the Iranian President and Holocaust denier literally threatens to eliminate Israel." Begley goes on to write: "Now it is true that, due to deeply rooted historical reasons, we value poems more highly than editorials or political pamphlets, and we trust poets with prophetic gifts that stretch beyond the capabilities of editorialists." Austrian writer Clemens Setz told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on April 7 that he found it a pity "that an important author like Günter Grass said that and not a blogger from Youtube. One could simply ignore a blogger."

This is precisely the point: one can shrug one's shoulders and ignore prosaic commentaries. Even deadly serious political warnings issued by high-level politicians, much more influential than editorialists or bloggers, would not have delivered the same message. In fact, government officials from the Russian Federation have been most outspoken in warning against Israeli threats to bomb Iran. And, Grass's view, which he expressed in an interview after his poem appeared, that an Israeli attack could trigger a third world war found confirmation in press reports on Russian preparations to deploy troops along Iran's northern border in anticipation of an Israeli-US attack. In early April, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan in this connection. (4) Not to

mention the expanding ranks of professional military — active or retired, American, European, or Israeli —, who have spelled out the foreseeable, catastrophic consequences of any such aerial bombardment of Iran. But the reaction to all this dire cautionary advice from such reliable quarters has been nowhere near that which followed the poem by the German writer.

Grass's poem hit the bull's eye. Although (or perhaps because) the piece lacks the literary finesse of his poetry, the act itself was metaphorical. Grass lobbed a poetical hand-grenade into a banal prosaic political universe. And he exploited to the full "poetic license," but in a manner that PhD candidates writing dissertations on the concept could hardly fathom. He donned the garb of the poet to utter truths which no prose writer dare commit to paper. In so doing, he was following a long and noble tradition among German poets, from the medieval Walter von der Vogelweide, through Goethe and Heine, to Brecht and Enzensberger, as Grass recalled in an interview on national German TV.(5)

Why did he do it? To indulge in a bit of speculation, consider the following: here is a man, yes, well into his eighties, who has experienced the scourge of war as well as the dishonor of affiliation with Germany's Nazi past. He has observed the absurd non-debate about Israel's and Iran's nuclear programs and read the apologetic "clarifications" in the German (and other) press of Israel's perceived fear of annihilation — that "hypocrisy of the West" he refers to. He has a distinct sense of a clear danger emanating from ruling circles in nuclear power Israel and estimates, considering the ongoing election process in the U.S., what blackmail potential a new war in the region would represent for the incumbent Obama. At the same time, he acknowledges the restart of diplomatic contacts between Iran and the 5+1, cast in the media as a last chance to avoid confrontation. At 85 years of age, he has earned the admiration and respect of readers worldwide for his genuine literary achievements and (as his contemporary Scholl-Latour is fond of repeating about old men) he has nothing to lose, no matter what alleged scandal he may explode. In a calculated effort to force an officially unthinkable, socially and politically impermissible item onto the political agenda in the most theatrical manner possible, he decides to say what he knows and to do so ostentatiously in the form of a poem.

It has worked. Since April 4, the day the piece appeared in print, Grass and the Grass issue have become ubiquitous. The public discussion which he initially complained had not addressed the substance of his message has since then seized on the real issues. In talk shows on German prime time television and radio, figures like Peter Scholl-Latour, or Franziska Augstein, Ullrich Pik, and Horst Telschik, can openly talk about Israel's nuclear capabilities, its government's declared stance, the history of aggression against Arabs, with two unwarranted bombardments of atomic energy facilities in Iraq in 1981 and Syria three years ago (which flew in the face of international law), the facts of the Iranian program including its adherence to the NPT and its earlier history under the Shah, and so much more.(6) The notion that Israel merely wants to protect its security has been corrected by the statement that what Israel wants to protect is its nuclear monopoly in the region. Demonstrators in the annual German peace marches over Easter weekend carried signs saying, "Grass is right" and his party, the SPD, after splitting down the middle on his intervention, has come around. The discussion generated around these themes is not always the most sovereign and rational, to be sure, but that, too, is a welcome new element because it denotes the realism and seriousness that have entered political discourse in Germany.

Günter Grass has perhaps contributed to thwarting a new war in the already tempestuous

Middle East. Were Israel to go ahead, with or without the U.S., to bomb Iran's nuclear installations, thus catalyzing regional war and potentially more, that would provide the grim confirmation that Grass was not exaggerating. But, as he makes the point in his poem, that would be too late. Grass has certainly redefined the power of poetry. For this, he deserves congratulations and thanks.

Notes

1.

<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/gedicht-zum-konflikt-zwischen-israel-und-iran-was-gesagt-werden-muss-1.1325809> for the German text and, in English:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/apr/05/gunter-grass-what-must-be-said/>

2. For an overview of the controversy about Ahmadinejad's remarks about Israel, see:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahmoud_Ahmadinejad_and_Israel#Translation_controversy

3. Grass explained these points in an interview with German national television:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLS7w3jy6dQ>

4. http://www.uffedieffe.com/index.php?option=com_jcs&view=jcs&layout=form&Itemid=134&aid=79403ahttp://articles.businessinsider.com/2012-04-09/news/31311454_1_russian-defense-ministry-military-action-dmitry-rogozin

5. See footnote 3.

6. The Shah's ambitious nuclear program was supported by the U.S., France, and Germany and no one considered it a threat to Israel. One leading reason was that the program was under foreign control, especially that the nuclear scientists and engineers were foreigners. Today, it is Iran's know-how, in the person of its scientists, that constitutes a threat in Israel's eyes. Thus the policy of targeted assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists. For discussion of the program under the Shah:
<http://www.dradio.de/dlf/sendungen/hintergrundpolitik/1729336/> and for historical background: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=18235>.

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