

NICOLE THESZ

## Nature Romanticism and the Grimms' Tales

### An Ecocritical Approach to Günter Grass's *The Flounder* and *The Rat*

Ever since his debut with *The Tin Drum* in 1959, Günter Grass has referred to fairy tales in his texts, using motifs such as the phrase “once upon a time” in what one might call his magical realist prose.<sup>1</sup> His mid-career novels *The Flounder* (1977) and *The Rat* (1986) target issues that preoccupied Germans in the postwar decades: the battle between the sexes, ecological devastation, and nuclear armament. In particular, Grass draws on the Grimms' tales that depict human dealings with the natural world. Fairy tales and their characters come to stand as representatives of nature in a struggle against the potential destruction of the earth. *The Flounder* and *The Rat* arrived on a “Märchenwelle” (Castein 97) published in the 1970s and 1980s in West Germany. This wave of modern tales took an irreverent look at the Grimms' collection, opposing previous tendencies to search in fairy tales for “redemption from the past” after 1945 (Zipes, “Struggle” 170–74). Like the Grimms before him, Grass appropriates tradition and reinterprets it on his own terms. Although he draws attention to the problematic ideological underpinnings of the romantics' work with folklore, he shares with them the common desire to use tales as repositories for dreams and better lives.<sup>2</sup>

*The Flounder* depicts the return to a maternal Eden that was lost when patriarchal history began, while *The Rat* imagines the nuclear and ecological destruction of the world and its repopulation by rats. Various narrative strands

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feature feminist ecologists, genetically modified rat-humans called Watson-Cricks, and scenes of a fairy-tale forest in which the Grimms' characters become endangered species of sorts. *The Rat* protests a one-sided, rationalist interpretation of enlightenment philosophy: "Das ist für mich die Sackgasse der europäischen Aufklärung. Die Verkürzung des Vernunftbegriffs auf das Technische. . . Ein Fortschrittsbegriff, der nur noch auf Zuwachs hin orientiert war, hat uns dazu gebracht, zum Beispiel unsere Träume nicht mehr ernst zu nehmen" ("To me, this is the dead-end of the European enlightenment. . . By reducing the concept of reason to technology, we have been led, for instance, to stop taking our dreams seriously"; Grass, "Mir träumte" 348). As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno have argued, enlightenment rationalism became implicated under Nazism. Grass critiques the alienation of individuals under twentieth-century conditions and counters the lack of dreams by spinning variants of the Grimms' tales.

*The Flounder* and *The Rat* urgently express concerns about a world endangered by pollution and modern warfare. By merging classic fairy tales with images of a destroyed environment, Grass reveals an inherent connection between nature romanticism and the yearnings for unity and harmony visible in the ecology and peace movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Images of modern man's problematic relations with nature arise from a rewriting of the Grimms' tales, notably "The Fisherman and His Wife," "Hansel and Gretel," "The Maiden without Hands," and "Brier Rose." The following comparison between the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (KHM) and Grass's novels, however, reveals striking differences in the approach to the natural world. In the Grimms' tales, nature is an ambivalent realm: the woods and fauna at times protect and at other times persecute man. Grass's twentieth-century fairy tales take an altogether more reverent approach to the natural world, which reflects their environmentalist context. His novels demonstrate a new awareness of the interdependence between humans, cultures, and their environments. Although *The Flounder* and *The Rat* have been seen as part of a tendency for "catastrophism" and apocalypse in postwar German literature (Goodbody 159), the intertextuality with fairy tales has yet to be examined within the framework of romanticism, ecology, and national identity. After a brief introduction to ecocriticism, this discussion turns to maternal and moral images of nature in *The Flounder*, to fairy tales and human-nature interactions in *The Rat*, and ends by examining the forest motif in literature, environmentalism, and the politics of German identity.

### Romantic Ecology

Grass's novels enable us to view ecology and environmentalism through the lens of cultural criticism, since the author inquires into strategies to survive

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civilization and its inventions. Studies in ecocriticism suggest that literature plays a decisive role in conceptualizing our interactions with the environment. William Cronon, for instance, stresses the need to engage in dialogue about the diverse ways in which cultures and individuals imagine nature and approach environmental preservation (52). In *Romantic Ecology* Jonathan Bate proposes that nature romanticism was a powerful means of expressing human attitudes toward their surroundings, one that “must be reclaimed” for ecocriticism (19). Indeed, environmentalist concerns intersect with the romantic desire for unity, “the yearning to encompass the world in mighty grasps” (Walzel 23). The era around 1800 still lacked a formal division between the natural sciences, philosophy, and aesthetics (Kurz 143–44). When twentieth-century critics “assume that all societies alienate mankind from nature,” they apply anachronistic views to the romantics, who “believed that humankind *belonged* in, could and should be at home within, the world of natural processes” (Kroeber 5). The transcendence of romantics was not one that lifted them above humanity, but rather one that anchored them in the depths of biological existence: death, dream, and fantasy.

In *The Comedy of Survival* Joseph W. Meeker suggests that the tragic depiction of humans in literature elevates them above nature, a position that is dangerous for human survival (38). Our instincts are the stuff of comedy, which recognizes the human connection to nature and ultimately helps to protect us from our animalistic drives (Meeker 39–41). This model of human interactions with nature bears resemblance to François Rabelais’s vision of mankind as humanized through its base corporality. Grass revisits this tradition in *The Tin Drum*, where “the grotesque body” of Oskar Matzerath is reminiscent of not only Rabelais but also fairy tales (Arnds, *Representation* 40). At the same time, Grass’s style aligns him with the romantics as he lets the protagonist’s humanness shine through his strange exterior: “*Die Blechtrommel* reflects the deeper humanity of German romanticism, which did not reject the grotesque” (Arnds, “German Fairy Tale” 437).

Parallels between Grass’s work and romanticism are visible, furthermore, in his imagery of nature, which is characterized by an idyllic prehistoric existence and the fairy-tale forest. Links can be drawn to the tradition of the romantic wanderer who gazes over misty forests in Caspar David Friedrich’s classic painting *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (“Wanderer above the Sea of Fog” [1818]). In *The Flounder* and *The Rat*, Grass imagines the yet undestroyed ecology of Polish marshes and German forests, whose idyllic intactness mirror the “vast landscapes” that Theodore Ziolkowski sees in Friedrich’s art (3). The idealistic “extension of life” in death, as evoked by Novalis (Ziolkowski 3), or in the supernatural, which colors the Grimms’ tales, resurfaces in the equally

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compelling extension of experience in *The Flounder*, where the narrator moves beyond his personal existence in imagined memories of prehistoric pasts.

References to German romanticism are traditionally associated with the quest for the "blue flower";<sup>3</sup> images of the German forest; as well as the poetry, songs, and tales collected by Clemens Brentano, Achim von Arnim, and the Grimms. Such allusions to the folk derived from a longing for simplicity and tradition in view of disparate principalities and the Napoleonic occupation. However, the notion of cultural heritage, as Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm framed their folkloristic pursuits, is problematic owing to its rather narrow white, middle-class, and male perspective. During World War II, in particular, the tales were used, virtually unchanged, "to give children a sense of their Nordic heritage and race" and "to further the illusion that the Nazis were recreating a folk community in keeping with the unfulfilled needs of the German people" (Zipes, *Subversion* 143). In *The Tin Drum* Grass draws connections between petit-bourgeois supporters of Nazism, the protagonist Oskar, and the dwarf tale; the grotesque perspective of the eternal three-year-old serves as a counter-culture to Nazi Germany and postwar rationalism (Arnds, *Representation* 6).

Nevertheless, Grass views fairy tales as a particularly German genre: "Ich . . . halte auch diese spezifisch deutsche Form des Erzählens für eine der Grundlagen unserer Literatur. . . . Mit deutsch meine ich, daß so etwas wie die Grimmsche Märchen-Sammlung in anderen Ländern nicht vorhanden ist, nicht von solchem Gewicht ist" ("I believe that this specifically German form of storytelling is one of the foundations of our literature. . . . With German I mean that something like the Grimms' collection does not exist in other countries, or is not emphasized to the same extent").<sup>4</sup> Since Grass has consistently called for strategic doubt, "Zweifel," vis-à-vis history,<sup>5</sup> he would appear to be far removed from any aspirations to national pride. Moreover, he has suggested that Germans should adopt a sober constitutional patriotism (*Verfassungspatriotismus*). Grass's comment on the German fairy tale, however, matches his repeated references to the *Kulturnation*, which is founded on a shared culture. In fact, the author once proposed interpreting Germany as a literary entity: "Deutschland—ein literarischer Begriff."<sup>6</sup> His notion of the German language as a source of identity is reminiscent of the Grimms' patriotic evocation of Germanic philology.

Given the debates about romantic nationalism, the reference to Grass's "urdeutschen Zug zum Romantischen" ("fundamentally German tendency toward romanticism"; Kluger 38) is somewhat problematic. At the same time, Peter Arnds regards Grass's later works, *The Flounder* and *The Rat*, as essentially antiromantic, contrasting these with *The Tin Drum*, which emphasizes Oskar's victimization in an inhuman regime by "reviving the Romantic dwarf tale"

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(Arnds, "German Fairy Tale" 425). But while Arnds seems to equate the radical modernization of fairy tale with a rejection of romanticism, I would argue that even in his satiric use of fairy tale, Grass still subscribes to images of longing, folkloristic simplicity, and harmony with nature. *The Flounder* is essentially romantic, since it portrays fairy tale as a firsthand source of folk traditions and wisdom (Neuhaus 136). Because the figures in Grass's texts find normality wanting, a condition Lothar Pikulik calls *Das Ungenügen an der Realität* ("Reality as an Imperfect Condition"), they construe "weniger ein Abbild als ein Gegenbild der Wirklichkeitserfahrung" ("less a reflection than a counter-image to realistic experiences"; Pikulik 28). Grass shows the impossibility of fairy tale in the twentieth century, but in fact, these tales have always served to confront everyday struggle with human desires.

Fairy tales, as Donald Haase points out, have been "thought to reach back like sacred works to 'times past,' to some ancient, pristine age" (63). Mirroring the restlessness (383) and the homelessness (492) that Ricarda Huch's *Blütezeit der Romantik* ("Zenith of Romanticism") describes, the life journeys of Grass's characters are fraught with longing and disorientation. The yearning for escape, as expressed by Oskar Walzel in 1923, reflects romantic desires as well as the hopes of respite from chaos and war in the twentieth century: "The solitude and enchantment of the forest, the rushing mill-stream, the nocturnal stillness of the German village, the cry of the night watchman, splashing fountains, palace ruins and a neglected garden in which weatherbeaten statues crumble, the fragments of a demolished fortress: everything that creates the yearning to escape from the monotony of daily life is romantic" (Walzel 3). As in many fairy tales that begin with variations upon the theme of banishment, Grass's characters are involved in quests and experiences of exile. His individualized, modern characters reflect a profound sense of alienation that is never resolved. Oskar's existentialist delight in despair is transformed into stifling existential fears in the 1970s about environmental destruction, gender conflict, and the threat of nuclear warfare.

### **Mother Nature and Moral Nature**

The Grimms' version of "The Fisherman and His Wife" ("Vom Fischer und syner Fru," KHM 19) was provided by Philip Otto Runge and entered the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in 1812. The central contention of *The Flounder* is that an alternate (and later destroyed) variant of the tale portrays history as a consequence of the male will to power. Unlike the Grimms' misogynistic version of the tale, the lost variant invoked by Grass allegedly blamed the husband's greed and megalomania for an apocalyptic destruction of the world (Butt 445).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, *The Flounder* has been read as an "Antimärchen" (Hunt,

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"Vom Märchenwald" 145), a term used to describe tales with an unhappy ending as well as modernized versions that contrast "the perfect world of the fairy tale with sociopolitical issues, marital problems, and economic worries" (Mieder 50). Grass's text reverses the source text's plotline against the background of twentieth-century discourses on gender, the environment, and *Heimat* ("home," "homeland," or "native region/country").

Grass's 1977 novel fits right into the increasing concerns about acid rain, polluted streams, and the dwindling of land "untouched by man" (Bate 56). The first chapter of *The Flounder*, titled "Im ersten Monat" ("In the first month"; Butt 7), refers to the pregnancy of the narrator's wife, a modern Ilsebill. It describes the narrator's imaginary time travel back to the Baltic Sea during the Stone Age, where he lives nestled "zwischen den Sümpfen der Weichselmündung" ("between the swamps of the Vistula estuary"; 18). In this prehistoric idyll, men live in infantile harmony with the matriarch Aua. Earth and women provide unlimited, though simple, sustenance for the Edeks, the men of the tribe. The persistent longing of Grass's narrator is grotesquely symbolized by the third breast that Aua bears: "Glaub mir, Ilsebill: sie hatte drei. Die Natur schafft das" ("Believe me, Ilsebill: she had three. Nature can do this"; 10). Ilsebill, the narrator's wife, derides Aua's third breast as "männliche Wunschprojektion" ("male fantasy"; 11), but it primarily represents a positive symbol of plenty—"Überfluß" and "ewig Sättigung" ("abundance" and "eternal fulfillment"; 11)—which serves as a comical and down-to-earth answer to the insistent longing that occupied the romantics. The third breast not only signifies abundance but also suggests a simple fare—much like the gruel of grass seeds that the Edeks enjoy (unlike the more sophisticated Goths [99–103])—and sets up a contrast with oversaturated consumer capitalism of twentieth-century Europe.<sup>8</sup>

The Vistula estuary is the site of Grass's childhood, where Danzig, today's Gdańsk, would later be built. The nostalgic fantasy of the exiled author merges with postmodern criticism of technological progress. Although the Neolithic realm of Auas and Edeks at the Vistula River evokes a pristine *Heimat*, the prehistoric conditions preclude revisionist claims to Danzig. The nature that Grass's protagonist—a writer whose life mirrors the author's biography—encounters resembles the "Edenic narratives" (Slater 114) common to environmental discourse. The nostalgic "memory" of Eden stresses the decline of a once pristine world, giving birth to numerous "recovery narratives" of a return to nature.<sup>9</sup> The classic tale about the fisherman, however, takes a dystopian turn: "Ach, Butt! Dein Märchen geht böse aus" ("Oh, Flounder! Your fairy tale ends badly"; Butt 693). Grass's model, Runge's "The Fisherman and His Wife," ends badly for the eponymous couple. It contrasts the romanticized tales involving young heroes and heroines, and like other tales about married adults,

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“The Fisherman” focuses on marital strife and on the constraints of the world upon the couple.<sup>10</sup>

In *The Flounder* the narrator’s fantasies draw the prehistoric time of the Edenic Vistula estuary into contemporary reality, using the fairy tale about the flounder and the fisherman to contrast fantastic wishes and stark realities. Grass projects the wife’s megalomaniac wishes onto a mythic history and thereby transforms personal greed onto the scale of humanity. This story about “insatiability” seems to imply a rejection of romantic yearning (Thomas 169–70), although Grass does not criticize human longing in a general sense. The narrator’s—and, by extension, man’s—exaggerated desires are portrayed as the foundation for violence and wars, but the fisherman’s wife might well have benefited from modest improvement in life. Similarly, Grass’s modern Ilsebill and her somewhat banal desire for a dishwasher do not represent hubris, but rather reflect the couple’s incessant arguments about housekeeping (Butt 117).

Although *The Flounder* questions the gendered messages of nineteenth-century folklore, by letting man, not woman, succumb to temptation, Grass’s modern fairy tale is romantic in its emphasis on a golden age. The narrator of *The Flounder* is a time traveler of sorts, who flees gender wars to a prehistoric world. The cult of Aua, the prehistoric matriarch of his fantasy, maintains an idyllic life in which peace reigns between the sexes. Whereas Christian belief blames the fall from grace on Eve’s curiosity—a position that the Grimms’ KHM 19 supports—Grass’s novel contends that the fall was instigated by the male Flounder and his council to the prehistoric Edeks. He equates progress with a departure from nature and laments the consequences of enlightenment as “zunehmende Entfremdung von Mensch und Natur” (“the progressive separation of human and nature”; Filz 95). The narrator does not delve into *Hymns to the Night* in the vein of Novalis, but enacts a eulogy of maternal, undifferentiated, pacified nature.<sup>11</sup> His regressive dreams amount to a sort of dissolution into fantasies of prehistoric beginnings, where he, as an individual, has yet to be conceived.

Grass’s Aua is situated in a realm that values the eternal present, predating linear time and mapped-out space: “Sie hielt die Zeit auf. Sie war uns einziger Begriff. Unermüdlich erfand sie neue kultische Anlässe, das Seiende in feierlichen Umzügen zu bestätigen” (“She stopped time. Everything revolved around her. Tirelessly, she found occasions to celebrate Beingness through ceremonial processions”; Butt 38). From a relatively static, homogenous nature society, the eponymous flounder produces a modern, alienating culture with its penchant for counting, dating, amassing fortunes, and calculating profit (39). In the final analysis, Grass’s depiction of gender is more traditional than that of the Grimms’ tale. While KHM 19 forgoes the active male/passive female

schema by letting the wife dominate, *The Flounder* builds on the tradition of aligning woman and nature. The Vistula swamps remain a stagnant, peaceful realm of maternal sustenance until the male flounder's "gift" of knowledge enables men to build culture.

Grass's novel interprets the course of human history as a continual departure from Aua's primordial realm. Leaving the matriarch entails a fall from innocence, peace, and nature. *The Flounder* mirrors the discourse of environmentalism, where nature functions as a "moral imperative" and provides values that "seem innate, essential, eternal, nonnegotiable" (Cronon 36; emphasis in original). The desire for natural beginnings makes complete sense in a violent world. Persistent fantasies of swampy, womblike origins—"Urland, Ursprungsland, Mutter Erde" ("Ur-land, land of origin, Mother Earth"; Hunt, *Muttermythos* 22)—mirror a romantic yearning for a site of harmony. These dreams also reflect the tension between home and departure that is visible in romanticism—for example, in Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff's texts (Ziolkowski 3). Grass's images of nature and abundance demonstrate how environmentalist discourse reflects the basic needs for home, sustenance, and metaphysical unity by recognizing the "eternal shared need of food and our preoccupation for survival" (Diller 104). The longing for some indefinable joy, the blue flower, or a primordial home are all part of the human condition.

Whereas the Grimms shaped their collection to support moral and Christian messages, Grass's secular or pre-Christian perspective is focused on images of nature as maternal sustenance. Mirroring the tendency of environmentalism to replace "God as the authority for their beliefs" (Cronon 36), Grass frames the male cooperation with the flounder, a devil-like figure, as the original sin against nature. Not coincidentally, Aua's and Edek's initials are reminiscent of Adam and Eve, albeit with a reversal of gender. *The Flounder* thus ultimately aligns itself with the biblical account: just as Adam eats from the Tree of Knowledge, Edek is figuratively expelled from innocence by listening to and learning from the "professorial" flounder.<sup>12</sup> The "pact" with the fish is interpreted by Grass as the beginning of humanity's battle between the sexes.

Runge, the romantic painter who provided the fisherman's tale, emphasized "man's fundamental entanglement with nature's processes" (Prager 123). In KHM 19 the tale's close link between man's human condition and his environment is visible in how the tale progressively changes the sea's color and turbulence as Ilsebill's wishes become more hubristic: the water progresses from clear and calm to dark and putrid while the wind picks up and reaches hurricane-like proportions (Zipes, *Complete* 73–78). The wife's ever-expanding demands culminate in the desire to be God, whereupon the couple is demoted back into the fisherman's hovel. The Grimms' tale, of course, does not present this as a positive outcome,<sup>13</sup> but, interestingly, Grass's "moralistic eco-parable"



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(Preece 131) implies that we might read the tale's ending as the couple's return to a simple, rooted, and safe realm. While the tale provided by Runge implies that God, behind the elements, punishes the fisherman's wife, Grass's twentieth-century tale portrays nature as a nonmoral entity. It simply is, until it perishes, through human greed for production, consumption, and expansion.

However, the intertextual connections between KHM 19 and *The Flounder* allow for a subtext in which nature resents humanity. The power of nature in the Grimms' tale is matched in *The Flounder* by Aua's strategic refusal of the breast whenever one of the men becomes rebellious or seeks to transcend his confining infantile universe (Butt 32). The notion of nature as an "avenging angel" is invested with a new sort of morality in the context of environmentalism, where it comes to be seen as a just return for humans' neglect, or contempt, of their origins (Cronon 50). The dangers that romantic tales personify in the form of witches, ogres, and magic spells are recognized today as a projection of human failings. A new view of nature as victim therefore entails a fatalist, even "masochistic" belief that we should be punished for our misdeeds.<sup>14</sup> Grass's fairy tales follow the environmental model as they plot humans and their culture against nature, forming a modern, ecologist version of the moral tale.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, this juxtaposition of good and evil is not new; the dividing line has simply been redrawn. The Manichean roots of the ecologist story are already visible in the classic moral fairy tale "Mother Holle" (KHM 24), where evil is confronted not only by moral good but also by the purity of snow. This notion of purity, I would argue, is where twentieth-century dreams of nature, home, utopia, and nation have intersected in dangerous ways.

### Ecology in the *Märchenwald*

As the world becomes increasingly dependent on technology and science, humans urgently—even aggressively—claim nature as their own site of utopian and paradisiacal fantasies. Grass's ecological fairy-tale variants appeared in a highly charged political context. Rachel Carson's influential *Silent Spring* (1962) was translated into German, as was the 1972 "Club of Rome" study *The Limits to Growth*. The latter's dystopic visions of the future, as Mark Martin Grüttner shows, impacted Grass's *The Flounder* and *The Rat*.<sup>16</sup> The awareness of the need to curtail consumption became even more obvious in the course of the 1973–1974 oil crisis, while German catastrophe literature of the 1980s also derived from the widespread reporting on ailing forests (Goodbody 162). This *Waldsterben* (dying of forests) had ecological and cultural implications for a nation that invested its trees with myth and fairy tale, as well as patriotic imagery.

The motif of the *Märchenwald*, which Grass ironizes in *The Rat* but nevertheless evokes as central to German culture, builds on nineteenth-century dreams of an intact, pastoral, and healthy *Heimat*. After 1945 the proximity of discourses about nature and nationalism became problematic. Elias Canetti's theory on "Crowd Symbols" (1960) links masses to forests, both of which offer protection, but the critic also notes the catastrophic consequences, imagining the vertical trees turning into an equally upright army (84). Indeed, uncomfortable links exist between Nazism and nineteenth-century *Heimatschutz*, the conservation of the homeland (Riordan 23–24).<sup>17</sup> The reverence for pristine nature was at times linked to "the preservation of German racial purity in the homeland" (23). Owing to Germany's late industrialization, however, preservation efforts refrained from serious attempts to curb advances in production (14). Fairy tales, in fact, are testimonies to the prevalent human fear of hunger, poverty, and homelessness. The resulting greed, visible in the fisherman's wife, and the idealization of magical homes, the *Märchenwald*, hint at the deep connections between ecology and nationalism as ostensible providers of a safe home.

The abuse of nature lies at the root of both *The Flounder* and *The Rat*. By viewing the natural world as a victim of humanity, Grass reverses the age-old struggle of humanity against a hostile environment. Fairy tales and their forests, however, were never as innocent as one might assume, but rather were locations in which human activities and supernatural forces convened to represent deep-seated fears.<sup>18</sup> Aside from the classic example of "Hansel and Gretel" (KHM 15), the forest and human aggression are strikingly linked in KHM 40, "The Robber Bridegroom," where the heroine discovers on her journey into the forest that she is engaged to a murderous bandit. Grass's modern tales, in contrast, view nature as a precious and endangered entity. In *The Flounder* the narrator fantasizes about the swampy estuary under Aua's maternal reign. In stark contrast, the violent culmination of the novel lets patriarchal power turn nature into a site of tragedy. One of the heroines, Sibylle Miehlaui, is raped and killed by a gang of motorcyclists after she goes "immer tiefer hinein in den Wald" ("deeper and deeper into the forest"; Butt 626) on Father's Day. She is "mutterseelenallein" ("abandoned by all"; 626), reminiscent of fairy-tale characters. Whereas the forests in the Grimms' tales conspire to either help or defeat those who pass through, Grass's novel lets nature remain neutral, reflecting back whatever humans make of it.

Trees and woods, which appear in ninety-two of the two hundred Grimms' tales in the 1857 edition, function as sites of romantic imagining (Ono 74). The juncture of forest and folktale relates to the romantics' "organic conception of nature and of art" (Walzel 20): "The purpose of their collecting folksongs, tales, proverbs, legends, and documents was to write a history of old German *Poesie*

and to demonstrate how *Kunstpoesie* (refined literature) evolved out of traditional folk material and how *Kunstpoesie* had gradually forced *Naturpoesie* (natural literature such as tales, legends, etc.) to recede during the Renaissance and take refuge among the folk in an oral tradition" (Zipes, "Dreams" 33).

Forests are less natural reality than nostalgic concept, coming to be seen as "the symbolic preserves of the popular and oral traditions they set out to recover" (Harrison 168). Critics have also linked the *Märchenwald* to the Grimm brothers' *Naturpoesie*. This biologization of literature is sustained by the brothers' awareness of the destruction of old-growth forests in Europe (Ono 82–83). Jacob Grimm wrote to Achim von Arnim: "Ausgegangen sind die großen reinen Thiere, welche Pflanzen aßen, und die Elephanten vermindern sich; die großen viel Tage langen Wälder sind ausgehauen worden, und das ganze Land ist mehr und mehr in Wege, Canäle und Ackerfurchen getheilt" ("the large herbivores have gone, and the elephants are being decimated; the woods that went on for days have been cut down, and the entire country is more and more divided into roads, canals, and furrows"; qtd. in Steig 119). This evocation of destroyed nature is comparable in tone and content to Grass's images of environmental destruction.<sup>19</sup> Like Grimm, the flounder describes drainage canals and demarcated fields as means of subjugating the lands: "Kanäle ziehen. Sümpfe trocken legen. Das Land einteilen, pflügen und in Besitz nehmen" ("Dig canals. Dry up the swamps. Divide up the countryside. Plow and subjugate the lands"; Butt 44).

The cultural legacy of the *Märchenwald* resurfaces in *The Rat* to expose the destruction of the sylvan habitat since the Grimms' times. In 1990 Grass published *Totes Holz* ("Dead Wood"), a collection of etchings and brief commentary about the German forest. The lifeless branches in that volume are a silent, disillusioned form of protest compared to the grotesque images of *The Rat* four years earlier. In the novel Grass's narrator writes a documentary script about the dying forest and acid rain, in which fairy-tale characters hide in the remnants of the forest. The video demonstrates how the government tries to use props (staged greenery and recorded birds' voices) to simulate a healthy landscape. In this documentary, stock characters such as the ubiquitous witch suffer the destruction of their natural habitat. Brier Rose is a somnolent lover (*Rättin* 124–25), the prince is an obsessive kisser (126), and Rumpelstiltskin's leg is displayed in a museum along with the hatchet that maimed the maiden without hands (127).<sup>20</sup> Although Grass parodies fairy-tale characters, they are in fact taken very seriously as representatives of nature, especially since the violence in the Grimms' tales allows for parallels to the equally brutal present. The endangered fairy tales and their woods testify to a crass destruction of heritage, in both a cultural and ecological sense. Without natural resources,

human life is impossible, and cultural and political aims must certainly perish (Hunt, "Vom Märchenwald" 153).

Grass reclaims the fascination of folktale in order to lend nature—which is silent in *The Flounder*—a voice and agency through the fairy-tale figures: "wie überall im Land fällt auch hier saurer Regen, den die Märchengestalten fürchten" ("like everywhere in the country, acid rain falls here and is feared by the fairy-tale characters"; *Rättin* 126). The loss of forest emerges from satiric scenes on the *Märchenstraße*, a touristy route in Germany,<sup>21</sup> along which the unnamed German chancellor travels with his family and convoy. Alluding to the political turn of the romantics (Walzel 134–37), a twentieth-century Jacob Grimm is minister for "Wald, Flüsse, Seen und Luft" ("forests, rivers, lakes, and air"; *Rättin* 51), assisted by his brother, Wilhelm. During a short stop the chancellor's children, Johannes and Margarete, disappear into the remnants of the woods (54). This voluntary departure, of course, contrasts the abandonment of the siblings in the Grimms' "Hansel and Gretel." There, the dense forest spells danger, whereas environmentalists—twentieth-century nature romantics—might see hopes of a healthy ecology. The chancellor, like the tale's stepmother, is only too willing to let his children remain in the woods: "Zwei Aussteiger mehr! Undankbare! Wir werden das zu verschmerzen wissen" ("Two more losers! Thankless youth! We can get along without them"; 55). Therefore, the comment by a reincarnated Wilhelm Grimm—"du siehst, lieber Bruder, die alten Märchen hören nicht auf" ("you see, my dear brother, the old fairy tales never end"; 55)—indicates that the tragedy of old tales lives on.

In the twentieth century, child abandonment and neglect are taken to a political level. The chancellor betrays the interests of nature and young people, even his own offspring. The generational conflict is no longer for basic sustenance, as in "Hansel and Gretel," but for the sustainability of natural resources. Moreover, characters compete for the legacy of the Grimms' tales and German forests. The modern-day Hansel and Gretel are not yet alienated from the truth of the tales. Their encounter with the fairy-tale population enables Johannes and Margarete to recognize nature's cry for help, while the chancellor prefers a façade of intact life and culture. As he drives along "'Die deutsche Märchenstraße' durch einst dichten Mischwald" ("The German fairy-tale road' through what used to be a dense forest"; 48) in a secured car and with a police escort, it is quite obvious that the forest, and not the chancellor, needs protection. The politician's ability to read scientific statistics of devastation but to ignore "landauf landab geleugneten bewiesenen Schäden" ("destruction that has been ignored proven throughout the country"; 48) indicate that the forest has become the victim of humans. This scene demonstrates the shift away from the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, where humans fall prey to nature in its various forms, to the

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contemporary world in which humankind endangers the environment. At the same time, Grass draws on the Grimms' version of human-nature interactions when he has fairy-tale characters attempt to take over Bonn by disseminating magic seeds. In this modern *Märchenwald* the German parliament needs protection, although the politicians in fact resemble fairy-tale villains, who are ultimately assailed by agents of fate. Unlike the fairy tale, however, justice achieves only a temporary reversal. The government ultimately comes out on top, running down trees and Brier Rose in their dragonlike tanks (422).

Because *The Rat* turns to nineteenth-century tales in dealing with the present, Jürgen Barkhoff reads the intertextual uprising against the German government as "eine Mobilisierung des kulturellen Gedächtnisses gegen die ökologische Gefahr" ("a mobilization of cultural memory against environmental dangers"), based on "die Erinnerung des subversiv-utopischen Potentials" ("the memory of the subversive, utopian potential"; 159) of the fairy-tale genre. A further implication might be that Grass rescues this subversive potential from appropriations by conservative forces, even from the Grimms, whose bourgeois imprint has been widely noted. In *The Flounder* Grass criticizes the collectors' ethics by imagining a fictional meeting of Arnim, Brentano, and the Grimm brothers in the Oliva forest, where the alternate version of "The Fisherman and His Wife" is burned: "the secret meeting place is an important ingredient in the story about the lost 'other truth.' Thus the peaceful tranquillity of a moonlit night—another favorite romantic motif—is disturbed by Runge's burning of the one version of the fairy tale" (Mews 171). This nocturnal scene parodies the poets as chauvinist cultural censors, since none of the romantics (except the only woman present, Bettina von Arnim) protest the destruction of the feminist variant. At the same time, this depiction alludes to the book burnings by National Socialists (172) and even seems to support postwar debates about connections between folklore and Nazi ideology.

Grass ironizes the romantic location of the forest, which has stood as a natural and patriotic symbol of unity, but he does not set out to ridicule romantic tales. He instead lays bare the fissures that always resisted such unity and depicts violent encounters as a means to instill doubt into the blind faith in historical progress. The author has repeatedly turned to culture to address Germany's political problems, but his modern fairy tales critically examine both politics and cultural heritage. In *The Rat* the chancellor is unaware that there is no scenery left to miss, since his limousine's curtains are drawn as he rides through the dying forest, absentmindedly reading "Expertengutachten, Gegengutachten, Schadstoffstatistiken und Mortalitätsmuster der Weißtanne" ("expert opinions that disagree with each other, pollution statistics, and patterns of mortality in the silver fir"; *Rättin* 49). Where science and politics fail to gain his attention, so does culture, which the chancellor uses to distract him-

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self from the unpleasant truths: “er sucht vor großem Auftritt Entspannung, löst Kreuzworträtsel, weiß richtig den Namen Hölderlin einzurücken” (“he seeks relaxation before his big day, works a crossword puzzle, is able to pen in the name Hölderlin”; 49). The poet Friedrich Hölderlin is reduced to a crossword puzzle entry, but his famous line, “was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter” (“the work of poets is what will remain”; 189), gains a new meaning. Instead of celebrating poetry, Grass suggests that writing remains simply because all life has been destroyed. The banal use of literature for tourism (the *Märchenstraße*) or entertainment (the crossword puzzle) reflects the meaningless “Allgemeinbildung” (“well-rounded education”; 49) that is unable to transfer reading knowledge into action. But this is not the chancellor’s problem alone. Grass’s images of dying fairy tales imply that culture is less stable than his otherwise optimistic evocation of the *Kulturnation* would have it. Without the healthy foundation of resources and nature, the human and its culture are like plots without words—empty forms.

The dying forest in *The Rat* is given a eulogy that merges 1980s catastrophism with references to the violence in many of the classic fairy-tale plots. As in *The Flounder*, Grass revisits the romantic tendency to mix genres, inserting lyrical sections into the novel’s prose:

Weil der Wald	Since the forest
an den Menschen stirbt,	is being killed by man,
fliehen die Märchen,	the fairy tales flee,
weiß die Spindel nicht,	the spindle knows not
wen sie stechen soll,	whom to prick,
wissen des Mädchens Hände,	the maiden’s hands,
die der Vater ihm abgehackt,	which her father chopped off,
keinen einzigen Baum zu fassen [ . . . ].	find no tree to grasp.

(*Rätin* 48)

Grass’s poem incorporates several allusions to popular tales and, in particular, to the Grimm brothers’ variant of this vast, international body of literature. He is able to draw on earlier visions of patriarchal power in “Brier Rose” and “The Maiden without Hands,”<sup>22</sup> although he no longer romanticizes female victimhood. The maiden finds no tree, not because she has no hands, but because no trees are left in Grass’s image of environmental destruction. All that remains is the abstract notion of the forest.

The woods of nineteenth-century tales contain supernatural powers that reflect the unnamable dangers of a precarious life. In contrast, neo-romantic yearnings for destroyed nature lead to the fears and dangers that symbolically

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resided in the darkness of trees to move into the surroundings: “Weil an den Menschen der Wald starb, / gehen die Märchen zu Fuß in die Städte / und böse aus” (“Because the forest is being killed by humans / fairy tales walk to town / towards a bad ending”; *Rättin* 48). The mournful image of fleeing tales—personified representatives of fiction and fantasy—conveys a sense of irreversible loss. In fact, as they are transposed into the genre of the novel, these characters appear rather flat and one-dimensional. Grass suggests that they become lifeless not only through the destruction of their natural habitat but also through the separation from their native fairy-tale realms. As the trees succumb to acid rain, humans suffer a loss of cultural heritage, because they ignore that the imagination, the *Märchenwald*, is sustained by the direct experience of the natural forest.

The environmental movement seeks to communicate humanity’s vulnerability to its surroundings, a message inherent in the Sleeping Beauty tale type. The Grimms’ tale features a mysterious and threatening nature: as Brier Rose’s court sleeps, nature takes over in the form of hedges. In *The Rat* this scene is transformed into a revenge of nature when the German parliament is put to sleep and overgrown: “Wachstum! Überall legt die Natur sich quer” (“Growth! Nature gets in the way everywhere”; *Rättin* 356). Strikingly, Grass uses the verb “querliegen” (“to lie in the way”) similarly in *The Flounder* when he imagines the modern Ilsebill as a landscape that resists the planned nuclear reactor: “Quer liegt sie allen Plänen” (“She lies in the way of all plans”; *Butt* 658). Thus, in both scenes female characters merge with landscapes to protest abuses against nature. While classic fairy tales project dangers onto the forest, the hedge’s assault in *The Rat* is a means of self-defense against the German parliament, which represents a modern-day villainous “king.” Like the sleeping princess, the delegates can regain life only if nature is curbed, but in both the romantic tale and the postmodern novel the plants ultimately cede to the ruling house.

The Grimms’ “Maiden without Hands” (KHM 31), in contrast, presents a very different view of nature. Much like the maternal realm of *The Flounder*, nature in KHM 31 offers sustenance, as the heroine depends on the pear tree for nourishment. Initially harmed by a patriarch who cares more about his own well-being than his daughter’s, she is saved by a maternal force that resides in the Venus-shaped pear, while later an angel in the forest provides a home. Nature is thus an entity that requires balance: man’s desire to rule over trees (and women) is countered by a female force that is represented by the angel in “The Maiden without Hands” and the thirteenth fairy in “Brier Rose.” The endangered *Märchenwald* of the 1986 novel continues the *Flounder*’s fantasy of nature as a maternal, protective realm; just as the Auas suckle the infantile Edeks, the pear offers sustenance to the helpless. Both Grass and the pious tale KHM 31

essentially suggest that nature can be paradise, although its help depends on moral choices, in the Grimms' tales, and on biological realities, in Grass's case.

In an attempt to counteract the lethargy of capitalist consumer culture, Grass's novel combines fairy tales and alienation effect as he follows in the footsteps of the nineteenth-century folklorists, who "sought to 'revolutionize' the folk motifs so that they could serve as a new art form to expose and criticize the growing alienation and banality of everyday life which was slowly becoming dominated by a bureaucratized and industrialized market economy" (Zipes, *Breaking* 31). The consequences of capitalist culture are visible in *The Flounder* and *The Rat*, whose "back to nature" images are related to the alternative civic movements of the 1970s. As Grass transforms the down-to-earth plights of fairy-tale characters into comedies of survival, to use Meeker's term, ecocriticism is no longer limited to literary dealings with nature. We see that the tales themselves—their roots in human experience and imagination—depend on nature for survival.

Statements by Jacob Grimm about the destruction of forests and the "Herrlichkeit der Natur" ("wonder of nature"; qtd. in Steig 119) indicate that the preoccupation with ecology dates back into German cultural history. Just as Grimm sought to retrieve a better past in *Naturpoesie* and found *Kunstpoesie* to be essentially unnatural, Grass looks to fairy tale for a representation of times untainted by twentieth-century trauma. The question remains, however, whether the love of forests and folktale does not build on an ambivalent legacy. Grass's alignment of women and nature as victims without voices does not significantly transcend the classic portrayal of heroines: "isolation in the Grimms' tales, like silence, has a female face, and it is most frequently seen in the forest" (Bottigheimer 111). Images of the German forest also remind us of the unsettling longing for purity that not only links romanticism and ecologism but also fueled obsessions with racial hygiene. *The Tin Drum's* grotesque, rebellious Oskar Matzerath demonstrates Grass's rejection of the unsavory connections between intactness, health, or purity (Arnds, *Representation* 13). Nevertheless, Canetti, who fled Austria after the *Anschluss* to Nazi Germany, may have had the German forest's ambiguous beauty in mind when he compared troops to trees.

In the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* nature is a moral realm in which fate and fairies protect the worthy and punish the wicked. Contemporary ecological worries let Grass favor the version of nature as an "avenging angel." He places fairy-tale characters, such as Brier Rose, in the service of the natural world by actively protesting sylvan destruction. But the heroine's powers are weak in 1986, since neither God nor fate stand behind her. Whereas the fairy-tale quest moves to a happy ending, Grass's characters meet with uncertain destinies: the human interlocutors of *The Flounder* and *The Rat* are left stranded on a beach and a space capsule respectively. In a time when wishing no longer



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helps, memories of fairy tales expose the loss of cultural and natural heritage. But Grass's distorted magical worlds are interspersed with utopian scenarios. The hopeful connotations of *Märchen* are images of such strength that Grass presents them as a literary bastion of hope side by side with his stark criticism of the status quo.

### Notes

This essay is an expanded version of a presentation given at the 2008 American Comparative Literature Association conference.

1. This phrase forms a leitmotif in *Dog Years*, where the introduction of characters and locations leads up to the revelation of a heap of bones next to the Stutthof concentration camp: "es war einmal ein Knochenberg" ("once upon a time there was a pile of bones"; *Werkausgabe* 5: 403). For *The Rat* (*Die Rättin*) and *The Flounder* (*Der Butt*), vols. 8 and 11 of Grass's 1997 *Werkausgabe*, the German titles are used when citing parenthetically.
2. In "Dreams of a Better Bourgeois Life," Jack Zipes correlates the Grimms' lives—the early death of their father and ensuing poverty—with their study of folklore.
3. This symbol of intense and futile longing appears in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* by Novalis.
4. Interview with Fritz J. Raddatz 29–30.
5. Notably, in *From the Diary of a Snail*, where the protagonist, Hermann Ott, is nicknamed "Dr. Zweifel" (*Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke*, *Werkausgabe* 7: passim).
6. *Headbirths; or, The Germans Are Dying Out* (*Kopfgeburten oder Die Deutschen sterben aus*, *Werkausgabe* 10: 10).
7. Grass alludes to the existence of a Latvian version that blames the man, a claim substantiated in Uwe Johnson's brief survey of variants to the Grimms' KHM 19 (49).
8. In contrast, fairy tales deal with poverty by depicting and then resolving hunger: the overflow of gruel in "Der süße Brei" ("Sweet Porridge," KHM 103) does not convey oversaturation, but rather the dream to eat one's fill.
9. Carolyn Merchant uses this term to describe the plethora of stories about regaining an Edenic existence.
10. Examples of adult characters and the unromantic portrayal of marriage are also found in comic tales such as "The Lazy Spinner" (KHM 128) or "Little Farmer" (KHM 61).
11. Much like fairy tales, which revolve around birth, marriage, courtship, and beauty, the female bodies in Grass's tale are the site of pleasure and possession. The narrator's wife, Ilsebill, resists his dreams of Aua and his fantasies of refuge in the "Kürbislaube" ("gourd arbor"), his wife's pregnant body (Ryan 39–40).
12. Siegfried Mews draws attention to the flounder's "professorial" attitude toward Edek, but his article focuses on the references to literary history (163).
13. Julian Preece notes that the couple's fate eventually confirms the feudal order (131).
14. Axel Goodbody (159) cites Hermann Glaser, *Kulturgeschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1968–89* (Munich: Hanser, 1989), 216.

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15. Ecologism questions the right of humans to cultivate nature, a position evoked in the apocalypse of *The Rat*, while environmentalists call for sustainability in the uses of nature (Riordan 4–5).
16. In his study of Grass's *Zeitkritik* (political criticism) and intertextuality, Grüttner observes that the idyllic settings of fairy tales are used to criticize the tendency to naively imagine away ecological disaster (99).
17. Nicholas Saul draws attention to the “neo-Romantic” appropriation of the Grimms' tales in Hans Grimm's *Volk ohne Raum* (1926), which aligns notions of racial and environmental purity: “Friebott meets his devoted, blonde and blue-eyed, predestined future wife Melsene on a walk through the German ‘Urwald’ (primeval forest)” (Saul 341–42).
18. Hisako Ono conveys the dual nature of the “lebensbedrohlich-negative” (“life-threatening and negative”) and “natursegnend-positive Waldbild” (“nature-loving and positive image of the forest”; 76).
19. In the same letter, dated 20 May 1811, J. Grimm also evoked the “Herrlichkeit der Natur” (“wonder of nature”; qtd. in Steig 119) and described the comforts to be found in the outdoors: “wenn ich traurig bin und spazieren gehe, so finde ich Trost in der Macht und Wahrheit der Natur, ich habe nur einen Halm aufzuheben” (“when I am depressed and take a walk, I find comfort in the power and truth of nature—I only need to pick up a blade of grass”; 118). I bring these up because it might otherwise be overlooked that Grimm's term *Naturpoesie* relates not only to the simple realm of the folk but also to biological nature.
20. Grass alludes to the violent change that the Grimms introduced to KHM 55 (they replaced the escape on a wooden spoon with the self-destruction of the little man [Rättin 131]). For the 1810 version, see Ashliman.
21. Tourists can travel the 600 kilometers of cultural and kitschy attractions from Hanau (near Frankfurt), the Grimms' birth site, to Bremen in Northern Germany (the never-reached destination of the “Town Musicians” in KHM 27). The *Märchenstraße* website not only emphasizes the fairy tales but also demonstrates national pride in folklore: [www.deutsche-maerchenstrasse.de](http://www.deutsche-maerchenstrasse.de).
22. In Giambattista Basile's version, in contrast, it is a slave who maims the heroine at her own request in order to evade her brother's (not father's) sexual advances (513).

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