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Life under the Table:
An Investigation into the Themes and
Insecurity in Günter Grass's
Die Blechtrommel

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Günter Grass's linguistic masterpiece *Die Blechtrommel* is a complex labyrinth of intertwining motifs. An individual analysis of the various themes present in the work should therefore precede any holistic conclusions drawn. This seemingly overwhelming task can be facilitated through an in-depth examination of the usage of certain lexemes which support the primary textual themes. As Noel L. Thomas remarks about the novel's protagonist, "Oskar speaks the language of doubt; the metaphorical language, despite Oskar and as it were unbeknown to Oskar, sometimes reveals more than the narrator himself" (59-60). Ralph Freedman asserts similarly that "Grass's linguistic universe, which relies so much on descriptive words, pointing to things or impressions, conforms precisely to a narrative world in which the surface of external events—their chronology, their history—conceals an inner dimension" (56). It is clear that the utilization of language in *Die Blechtrommel* must be scrupulously considered in any productive analysis of the work. This investigation will focus specifically on the lexeme *unter*, in its function as a preposition as well as a prefixoid, as it is employed in association with the themes of fear and insecurity in the novel.

Günter Grass utilizes terms of spatial reference in *Die Blechtrommel* to indicate not only concrete physical dimensions in the narration, but also to express Oskar Matzerath's longing for security. The spatial preposition *unter* is an essential starting point for an analysis of the extent to which Grass's language enhances the theme of insecurity and fear in *Die Blechtrommel*. Physically being under something implies, at least partially, that one is protected from danger and less vulnerable. Hence, the frequency of characters in the

novel finding themselves underneath an object reinforces the theme of the individuals' need for safety and stresses their desire to be shielded from harm. As described in Duden's *Bedeutungswörterbuch*, the spatial preposition *unter* simply denotes "die tiefere Lage im Verhältnis zu einem anderen Genannten." But when viewed in a figurative sense, *unter* is extended to imply a certain dependence and even subordination, as in the phrase "unter jemandem arbeiten." This figurative denotation is observed as Oskar reports a loss of control over his senses while ill, having seen and heard "allerlei unterm Fieber" (507). Thus, it would seem that weighing the polysemy of *unter*, the habitual dwelling underneath other objects, could be regarded as a symbolic representation of a lack of self-determination. The characters have little, if any, control over their fates, a fact that is accentuated by the physical dimensions conveyed through the preposition *unter*.

The local preposition *unter* is projective, as it is employed in the context of viewing an object in relation to something else from a certain point of observation. Through the repeated utilization of *unter*, Grass projects the standpoint of the essentially powerless, insecure individual into his text. The narration begins with the tale of Anna Koljaiczek's skirts, a metaphor which resurfaces frequently throughout the novel. Oskar's grandfather hides under Anna's mysterious layered skirts, one "Oberrock" and three "Unterröcke" (10), thereby successfully avoiding capture by the German police (14). This initial episode involving the skirts is associated with the fear of persecution, as Joseph Koljaiczek is described as the one "mit der Angst unterm Rock" (14). The theme of fear and the search for a secure hiding place is introduced via the Koljaiczeks and becomes a thread woven throughout *Die Blechtrommel*, providing a common bond among the novel's many characters.

It should be pointed out, however, that the significance of "unterm Rock" extends further than a mere symbol for the refuge sought by persecuted or frightened individuals. The location is also a site for sexual activity, as marked by Oskar's depiction of the erotic pleasure of his grandmother. The "Unterröcke" themselves carry sexual connotations, as they can be translated not only as the skirts underneath the external one, but also as slips, items of lingerie. Oskar later informs the reader that his mother, Agnes Koljaiczek, was indeed conceived underneath the skirts of her mother at the time of her in-

terrogation by the German police officers (19). The combination of *unter* in its literal and figurative senses underscores the danger involved in this process of conception; Agnes is conceived "unter vier gleichfarbigen Röcken, unter Qualm, Ängsten, Seufzern, unter schrägem Regen und leidvoll betonten Vornamen der Heiligen, unter den einfallslosen Fragen und rauchgetrübbten Blicken zweier Landgendarmen" (ibid.). The event takes on further significance when one considers that Joseph is positioned under Anna during sexual intercourse, as opposed to the traditional placement of the woman underneath the man. This indicates the male's dependence on, and submission to, the feminine figure—the possessor of the womb.

Oskar's mother Agnes resembles her father in that, as a child, she finds "im Versteck ähnliche Sicherheit . . . als Joseph unter den Röcken der Anna fand" (24). Rather than her mother's skirts, however, Agnes seeks comfort elsewhere: "wenn sie nicht unter das Bett kroch, dann steckte sie im Kleiderschrank, und wenn Besuch da war, saß sie unter dem Tisch und mit ihr ihre Kodderpuppen" (23-24). It is significant that Agnes is in no apparent danger when she feels the need to hide. This is indicative of a generalized lack of individuals' security, regardless of the presence or absence of imminent peril. The urge to shield oneself from the outside world runs deeper than a primitive need for physical shelter; it is, rather, an inherent yearning for emotional stability and security. Due to social norms that cause most people to ignore their natural instincts and fears in favor of artificial courage, Agnes eventually outgrows her need for hiding underneath tables and beds. Mature adults who are considered emotionally stable seek refuge only when they are in danger of physical harm or death; under normal circumstances, they do not hide under furniture or in closets. However, young Agnes, and later her son Oskar, demonstrate the inherent human instinct of seeking shelter.

Just as the conception of Oskar's mother is reported in terms of the objects and conditions under which it took place, the protagonist's birth is depicted as having occurred "unter den Glühbirnen" (46). He visualizes himself as being underneath an object from the very start; his perspective does not allow for the idea that he is above, i.e. superior to, anything.

Oskar continues the family tradition with his preference for remaining underneath tables rather than exposing himself to the world.

As a three-year old, Oskar "blieb unter dem Tisch" while his parents and Jan Bronski played skat (74). Oskar amuses himself by observing the risqué under-the-table behavior of his mother and Jan Bronski, but more importantly, he associates existence under the table with a sense of well-being: "Ich fühlte mich wohl unter der Tischplatte, im Windschatten des herabhängenden Tischtuches" (75). As in the case of Agnes, there is no evident reason for Oskar to remain under the table. He does so not out of immediate necessity, but rather, due to a natural impulse. Oskar's resistance to exposure becomes even more apparent as he explains his inclination to spend time in the attic of the apartment building in which the Matzeraths live: "Während der Hof für Oskar voller Gefahren war, bot ihm der Dachboden Sicherheit" (109). Once again, the need for security does not arise out of a life-or-death situation; the "Gefahren" to which he refers are nothing more than some taunting children. It is not the relatively harmless children, however, that cause Oskar to stay in the attic. Oskar is fleeing from a much more menacing force, that of human plight.

A conscious awareness of Oskar's own belief that existence underneath something provides protection and security is demonstrated through his treatment of the sacred tin drum. He tells about his concealment of the drum during the confrontation with the gang known as "die Stäuber": "Als ich aufstand, nahm ich das Blech, um es vor weiteren Schäden besser bewahren zu können, an mich, unter den Kittel" (449). The importance that Oskar places on the drum, his link between past and present, is highlighted by his protective treatment of it in this scene. Handling the drum as if it were a living creature, Oskar is determined to provide it with the protection from the world which he cannot seem to find for himself.

Oskar meets the midget Bebra, for whom he holds great respect for a time, at a circus with his parents (131). Bebra's words of wisdom to Oskar upon their meeting also require analysis in light of projective prepositions and the theme of fear and insecurity: "Kleine Leute wie wir finden selbst auf überfülltesten Tribünen noch ein Plätzchen. Und wenn nicht auf der Tribüne, dann unter der Tribüne, aber niemals vor der Tribüne" (133). The "Tribünen" to which he refers are those found at the Nazi propaganda-rallies. In the same chapter "Die Tribüne," Oskar secretly follows Alfred Matzerath to one of these rallies, where he hides "unter dem Rednerpult" (139). The par-

tially enclosed area underneath the grandstands provides a realm where Oskar can observe what is taking place. In his place underneath the crowd, however, he is not completely exposed and susceptible to the Nazi propaganda that is being presented in front of them. After the death of the dwarf Roswitha, Bebra also associates the space underneath the grandstands with security: "Wir Zwerge und Narren sollten nicht auf einem Beton tanzen, der für Riesen gestampft und hart wurde! Wären wir nur unter den Tribünen geblieben, wo uns niemand vermutete" (424).

An important distinction to be made between Oskar and Agnes is that Oskar, unlike his mother, never abandons his inclination for hiding in confined spaces. As an adult—inasmuch as he can be considered as such—he no longer sits under tables. But in the chapter entitled "Im Kleiderschrank," Oskar encloses himself in the closet of Schwester Dorothea (600-12). Furthermore, he constantly longs for the sanctuary underneath his grandmother Anna's skirts.

Later in life, as Oskar finds himself "unter dem Eiffelturm," he imagines sitting simultaneously under Anna's four skirts (406). The skirts of his grandmother are also his "Fluchtziel" in the final chapter of the novel (717). His yearning to return to the warmth and safety of Anna's skirts, or to conceal himself within the closet of a nurse, suggests a psychological desire to return to the ultimate site of protection, the womb. This instinct manifests itself often in Oskar's pursuit of enclosure; even when he sits under the table, he is at least partially enclosed because of the "herabhängenden Tischtuches" (75). Oskar expresses his own uncertainty as he writes in the present tense, as a thirty-year old:

Wer nimmt mich heut' unter die Röcke? Wer stellt mir das Tageslicht und das Lampenlicht ab? Wer gibt mir den Geruch jener gelblich zerfließenden, leicht ranzigen Butter, die meine Großmutter mir zur Kost unter den Röcken stapelte, beherbergte, ablagerte und mir einst zuteilte, damit sie mir anschluss, damit ich Geschmack fand (201).

Oskar's longing to return to the "womb" underneath his grandmother's skirts is expressed through the verb *untertauchen*: "Oskar wollte, sobald er sie sah, seinem Großvater Koljaiczek nacheifern, bei ihr

untertauchen und, wenn möglich, nie wieder außerhalb ihres Windschattens atmen müssen" (258). The verb *untertauchen* appears again in a combined literal and figurative sense later in the narration, as Oskar imagines a scenario in which he explains the story of Joseph Koljaiczek to Kurt, whom he considers his son (428-29). Oskar envisions depicting Koljaiczek as a millionaire in America: "Doch manchmal geht er wieder zu Wasser, schwimmt zurück, taucht hier unter, wo er erstmals als Brandstifter Schutz gefunden und seinen Teil zu meiner Mama spendete" (429). The image of Koljaiczek diving "unter ein Holzfloß" for protection is repeated here (*ibid.*).

Oskar's relentless, yet unsuccessful, attempts to establish permanent security indicate his search for something that is nowhere to be found. It shows that its very existence is a mere illusion. The second chapter of the novel, "Unterm Floß," signifies the uncertainty of taking cover under something. In a fantastic story about Koljaiczek's attempt to escape his pursuers by swimming, Oskar reveals his own skepticism about the effectiveness of refuge under a raft. He informs the reader that he firmly believes that Koljaiczek "unter dem Floß seinen Tod schaffte" (32-33). This idea is elaborated upon further in the following chapter through Oskar's friend Gottfried von Vittlar's ironic exposition regarding the advantages and disadvantages of life on and under the raft:

Ich befinde mich auf dem Floß. Hübsch ist es auf dem Floß. Mücken stechen mich, das ist lästig. - Ich befinde mich unter dem Floß. Hübsch ist es unter dem Floß. Keine Mücke sticht mich, das ist angenehm. Es ließe sich, glaube ich, leben unter dem Floß, wenn man nicht gleichzeitig die Absicht hätte, auf dem Floß weilend sich von Mücken stechen zu lassen (36-37).

The absurdity of Vittlar's theatrics in this scene expresses through use of irony that life under the *Floß* is actually much worse than life on top of it. The comparison is carried out through Grass's use of the preposition *auf*, which serves to indicate the contrasting spatial dimension to *unter*. Considered figuratively, *auf* suggests a certain control—being on top of things, so to speak. However, it is apparent that there is ultimately little difference between the two locations, on top of and underneath the raft, as evidenced by Vittlar's claim that it is

"hübsch" both "auf dem Floß" and "unter dem Floß" (36). While living underneath prevents annoying mosquito bites (comparable to the teasing children from Oskar's childhood), it also implies not living at all, but rather, drowning, as ascertained from Vittlar's association of Koljaiczek, the "Mann unter dem Floß," with the "Ertrunkenen" (37). Through the presumable outcome of Koljaiczek's situation, the means of evading persecution by taking cover under something is proven to provide nothing more than a false sense of security.

An examination of the term *Unterschlupf* points further to the theme of the impermanent nature of security. This implicit derivative of the verb *unterschlüpfen* is used by Grass on more than one occasion as a synonym for *Versteck*. In its first appearance in the text, *Unterschlupf* is connected with Joseph Koljaiczek's fear of exposure after his sexual encounter with Anna: "Schnell knöpfte er sich jene Hose zu, welche unter den Rücken offen zu tragen ihm Angst und ein grenzenloses Bedürfnis nach Unterschlupf geboten hatten" (17). The prefixoid *Unter-* serves to semantically link the concept of *Unterschlupf* to the *Unterröcke* of Anna Koljaiczek. In three other instances, *Unterschlupf* refers quite literally to the living accommodations of the Koljaiczeks (20, 33, 39). Given the implications of the free morpheme *unter* as described above, Grass's usage of the word *Unterschlupf* appears to be a deliberate attempt to place emphasis on the characters' search for security. The definition of the term contains two elements that shed light on this motif as well. Duden's *Bedeutungswörterbuch* defines *Unterschlupf* as the "Ort, an dem man Schutz findet oder an dem man sich vorübergehend verbirgt." According to this definition, one allegedly finds protection, exactly what Grass's characters are seeking, in an *Unterschlupf*. The other significant component of the definition is the term "vorübergehend." Residence in an *Unterschlupf* is a temporary condition, thus whatever protection it may offer is also only temporary. This illuminates the conclusion that Oskar eventually seems to reach, that the quest for lasting security is a futile one.

The recurrent usage of *unter* as a literal term of spatiality as well as in its figurative semantic role undoubtedly marks a hierarchy of sorts. A case in point is seen on Klepp Münzer's wall, on which hangs a picture of Queen Elizabeth of England and a set of bagpipes: "Unter dem Bild hing an einem Mauerhaken ein Dudelsack" (623-24).

As a symbol of Scotland, the bagpipes exemplify the fusion of the spatial-dimensional and the metaphorical ramifications derived from the morpheme *unter*. In the case of the Matzeraths and the other characters of the novel, they are all subordinates, and the power which forces them to remain oppressed is simply their insecurity and their fear of the human condition.

An analysis of Grass's utilization of *unter* in *Die Blechtrommel* reveals the significance bestowed upon the motifs of fear and insecurity. The application of this approach can be extended to other linguistic-thematic relationships within the text. As J. Harris Frederick remarks, the linguistic reality in Grass's texts is "more powerful, certainly more durable than the historical reality" (257). On this basis, an in-depth examination of key lexical elements marks the initial step in gaining insight into the distorted yet surprisingly believable reality *von unten* portrayed in *Die Blechtrommel*.

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"Friederike, Martha, Hilde": Christoph Heins 'Kleinaufnahmen' aus der deutschen Geschichte

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Heins Auseinandersetzung mit der Wechselwirkung von Geschichte, Geschichtsschreibung und Dichtung steht im Zentrum der Sekundärliteratur über diesen Autor. Viele Aspekte des Problems, wie z.B. die Frage nach der Beziehung zwischen Heins Geschichtsauffassung, die in seinen 'chronikalischen Aufzeichnungen' besonders deutlich zu Tage tritt, und dem offiziellen Geschichtsentwurf der marxistischen Geschichtsphilosophie in der DDR, blieben jedoch bis jetzt weitgehend unerforscht. Meine Arbeit versucht, das Problem am Beispiel der Geschichte "Friederike, Martha, Hilde" zu untersuchen.

Ausgehen möchte ich von Heins Definition des Begriffs Chronik. Unter Chronik versteht Hein ein Aneinanderreihen von 'Fakten,' eine Bestandsaufnahme der 'Realität,' aufgezeichnet von einem sich zu ihr distanziert verhaltenden Autor. Sie soll einem Protokoll gleichen und sachlich-nüchtern über das Vorgefundene berichten. "Ich empfinde den Beruf eines Schriftstellers als den eines Berichterstatters, eines Chronisten. Ich bin ein Schreiber von Chroniken, mit literarischen Mitteln natürlich" (Hein, *Stalin* 203).¹ Die Chronik soll laut Hein keine persönliche und moralische Wertung oder Sinndeutung des Autors enthalten. Mit einem solchen Literaturkonzept protestiert Hein gegen eine der Hauptforderungen, die bis in die 80er Jahre an die DDR-Schriftsteller gestellt wurden. Es ist die Forderung, der Autor müsse eine Art moralische Instanz für den Leser sein, ihm Lösungen der dargestellten Probleme anbieten und damit eine Literatur schaffen, die ein Wegweiser ist.² Im Gegensatz zu der DDR-Literaturkritik vertritt Hein die Ansicht, die Literatur müsse auf positive Beispiele verzichten. Der Prediger ist ihm zufolge geradezu ein Gegensatz zum Chronisten.