

BRIEF MENTIONS

EDWARD DILLER

A Mythic Journey: Günter Grass's Tin Drum

Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1974. Pp. 216. \$14.75.

Since *The Tin Drum* eventually could emerge as the major European novel of the second half of the twentieth century, and since it is replete with strange, bizarre, and "supernatural" events, no one should be extraordinarily surprised that the novel has been subjected to a full-scale mythological reading. Edward Diller has studied Grass's text with care, and he has explored a great number of mythological works, especially several books by Mircea Eliade and several by Joseph Campbell, perhaps most notably of all Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In general, *A Mythic Journey* offers some useful insights, but it also contains some of the most idiosyncratic commentary that I have ever encountered.

In Diller's estimation, little Oskar is a "demi-deity" (p. 5) or a "mythic hero of a chthonic order" (p. 36); and Oskar plays out his role, or rather various roles, in an epic which is "essentially a pagan myth of the twentieth century" (p. 34) or "essentially a novel dealing with a relationship between a protagonist and the feminine principle of the Great Mother" (pp. 38-39). More specifically, Grandma Koljaiczek is a "*tellus mater*, a potato goddess, a Kashubian Demeter" (p. 13); and her "reverse image" (p. 19) is the Black Cook, who is called the Black Witch in Ralph Manheim's well-known translation. "Whereas the grandmother represents birth, shelter, nourishment, peace, and harmony . . . the Black Cook represents terror, dissolution, and death" (p. 16). Moreover, Diller argues (unconvincingly, I think) that various female figures are "transformational composites" (p. 20) of the Great Mother and that other figures, such as Luzie Rennwand and the dog Lux, are "bizarre surrogates" (p. 158) for the Black Cook. Ultimately, however, Mother and Cook are aspects of

the same cycle—the endless cycle of Earth consuming her children and then giving forth new birth. As sketchy as these notations are, I wish to suggest that Diller is successful in elucidating one of the most important polarities in the novel. His comments on Luzie Rennwand and especially those on the Black Cook (in particular, pp. 160-61) surely will be of genuine assistance to all readers of *The Tin Drum*.

A mere list of some of Diller's questionable points and procedures must suffice. For instance, he is forced to invent some clear references in the novel, such as Oskar's declaration that he is "no Odysseus" (p. 79), a character whom Diller mentions frequently. Also, he seems obscure to me when he attempts to explain how Christian motifs are woven into the so-called "pagan myth." He is overly insistent on directional symbolism (East and West), and he is too intent on squeezing significance out of the literal meanings of the characters' names. But most important of all, his interpretations of many different facets of the novel are unquestionably strained, so much in fact that at times he seems determined to ignore common sense. Consider his remarks on Kurt (pp. 11, 103), the horse-head scene (pp. 22-23), Greff's ritualistic suicide (p. 62), and the Onion Cellar (pp. 122-23). Air raid sirens "are of course identical with the sirens of classical mythology, for both are clearly sinister and terrifying harbingers of doom" (p. 89)! At one point Diller "reminds" his readers of Eliade's comments on a "central post" ("the tent pole or the central post of the house"), and supposedly there is some relationship between this and the Polish Post Office (p. 74)! Or his interpretation of the colors of the carpets in the Zeidler flat (p. 114) is positively ludicrous. The marginal notation "nonsense"

appears frequently in my copy of *A Mythic Journey*.

If Diller had known where to stop, if he had honored Oskar's Goethe more than Oskar's Rasputin, I believe that he could have produced a major article on a major novel—say, an article showing how or to what extent Campbell's monomyth is manifested in *The Tin Drum* and how the Great Mother and the Black Cook oppose but ultimately complement one another. As Diller's offering now stands, a reader must make a painful effort to separate the existing handful or two of grain from the bushels of chaff.

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JOAQUÍN ROY

Julio Cortázar ante su sociedad

Barcelona: Ediciones Península,
1974. Pp. 279.

"The natural condition of the Argentine," Joaquín Roy informs us in this book by, for, and about Argentines, "is nothing less than solitary confinement" (p. 74). Given that starting point for the study of an author whose alienation of spirit in his home country has become physical by means of voluntary exile in France, we might expect to have our viewpoint on the universality of Cortázar's literary production at least slightly altered, since we have come to think of him as a rather extroverted writer. And so it is. One is accustomed to hearing from Latin American authors that the more truly they reflect and speak to the situations in their own nations, the more fully they communicate with men at large. Even an intensely personal work such as Cabrera Infante's *Tres tristes tigres* has received a good deal of attention in countries outside Cuba, much to the author's surprise. But we had come to think of Cortázar as such an international figure, one whose works deal mainly with Paris and the world.

What Roy's book sets in perspective is that Cortázar's best characters, wherever they might be at the moment, are still

profoundly Argentine, and his literary preoccupations are those of the Argentine spirit. In *Todos los fuegos el fuego*, Roy remind us, Cortázar's "concern is threefold: America, Argentina and mankind" (p. 209).

Those Argentine literary preoccupations, according to Roy, are mainly the solitude and lack of human communication which previous essayists have dealt with so exhaustively—authors such as Ezequiel Martínez Estrada and Eduardo Mallea. There is a rather lengthy survey of these themes and those related to them at the outset of the book—a bit too lengthy, one is inclined to feel. Also, the reader could wish for more material on the Argentine novelists who preceded Cortázar in dealing with such themes, men such as Roberto Arlt and Eduardo Mallea, this time considered as novelist as well as essayist.

There is a well thought out analysis of each of the pertinent works of Cortázar and the way it deals with specifically Argentine concerns. The highly complex theme of the double is dealt with in a provocative manner, in that Roy ties it in with the Argentine's partial solution to his solitude problem, the so-called "cult of friendship" (p. 56). The double, he seems to be saying, represents an attempt by the character to project a part of himself outward so that he can communicate with it, yet without really moving outside himself. Thus Oliveira and Traveler in *Rayuela* would represent more of a schizoid personality problem than a close interpersonal relationship.

Cortázar's insistence on his reader's participation with him in the act of creation is well known: he considers his reader his "protagonist and victim" (p. 218). Roy makes another worthy point when he links this concern with the solitude-communication problem. Cortázar feels that a work of literature does not even exist until someone reads it, and Roy states: "The only justification he sees for his works is that attempt at communication with himself and with 'an exterior and alien reality which is the reader'" (pp. 217-18). This is a fascinating idea: two modern men standing apart until one of them presents what amounts to a potential book for the other to take and make real as he experiences it and thus finishes creating it. Literature as communion and creation.