

Matthew Vollo

*Broken Mouths and Bloodied Beds: Grodek and Tynset*

Soon after the turn of the 20th century, mankind was ripped from the arms of peace and thrown into the ashes of a world scorched by the fires of war. It's no exaggeration to say that the world was fundamentally changed after the first and second world wars, which brought a level of violence on a global scale, the likes of which mankind had never seen. The wars were the first instance of total war being unleashed upon the world's population, a kind of warfare that affected average civilians directly. Both wars were terrifying to behold, yet had their own unique respective effect based on their makeup. World War I's trench warfare had thousands of men die daily just to barely move a couple of feet forward, the constant repetitions of which led to millions of deaths. The end of the first war also marked the end of several imperialist powers. World War II also had horrifying displays of violence, except this time at an even grander scale. But what marked this war as different from its predecessor was the grotesque and calculated cruelty shown by the Nazis in the Holocaust. Such evil, both banal and malicious, was released onto the world on a major scale.

Confronted with such horrific imagery, how does one even begin to process such acts? Two seminal works of post-war writing, *Grodek* by Trakl and *Tynset* by Hildesheimer, are written in response to, and one could argue as a way to process such horrors. Yet the moment in time in which they were written shapes their characteristics. *Grodek* was written during the First World war, with Trakl's poem documenting the mass death he saw in his time in the army. Such events were so tragic and immense for him that he actively tried to take his own life, and perhaps

the cocaine overdose that led to his death was a kind of suicide in of itself. By contrast, *Tynset* was written after the second world war, meaning that Hildesheimer was writing this work having seen the horrors of war, the Holocaust, and how anti-semitism and violence were still prevalent in the mass consciousness of Germany after the war. From a comparison of these works, we can see the intersection of two distinct points in time: one during the war and one after it. Both works have different ways of approaching and coping with the violence that their respective wars provided, but despite their differences, a commonalities could be found. The first commonality is that there is a shared struggle to process the violence coming from the war, and that the written text serves as this medium of attempting to understand or attempting to process. Both works process their respective events in different ways. *Grodek* serves not just as a testament to the horrors of war, but it also critiques nationalism (and in a sense, the nationalist takeover of romanticism). *Tynset* seemingly pushes the horrors of 'real life' historical violence to the background, while putting the fictional violence (as in with characters of the story) in the foreground. Despite their different approaches to processing mass death, both stories have emerged out of the cadaver of romanticism, and thus serve as responses to it in a way. Before diving into each respective poem and analyzing each, one must understand what both works have sprung out of. One must get to know the world that has gone, one must get to know Romanticism.

Romanticism was the leading poetic and artistic movement of the pre-war era in Europe (I use pre-war here to mean in the time before both world wars). Romanticism is somewhat of a hard movement to define, but generally it represented a rejection of science and scientific language, a deferment to nature, and heavily embraced emotions and imagination. The romantic era also saw a language as a means to reflect one's identity, and this held in the national sense as

well. Certain romantic poets and writers used romantic writings as a medium in order to reflect the identity and language of the nation state that they resided in. This romantic idea was co-opted into a kind of nationalist ideology, where the nation and a nation's people were exalted primarily (such examples, though this preceded Romanticism by some time, would be the French Revolution, which planted the seeds for this kind of thought, and such, planted the seeds for these specific ideas within Romanticism: the idea of a works of literature reflecting a nation and a nation's people) within literature. But after the turn of the century, we see the entire medium of Romanticism eaten struck down by the advent of war, specifically the First World war. There is an inability for Romanticism to describe war accurately in ways other than nationalist exaltation, with the naturalist and imaginary imagery failing to describe the horrors faced by reality. Thus, due to an inability to describe the real (or at least the horrors of) aspect of war, Romanticism was caught in a choking point.

*Grodek*, not only serves to critique romantic and nationalist thought, but also tries to the best of its ability to portray the horrors of war. The first two lines of the poem feature a piercing juxtaposition, where the autumn woods at evening (perhaps what would be the focus of a Romantic work of poetry) are filled with the sound of 'deadly weapons'. Here we see the concept of nature being subsumed or artificially filled with an invasive, external force. Concepts such as death and decay are not foreign to Trackl's work and description of nature, but the notion of this kind of violence engendered with weapons is something different in comparison. The overhead sun 'rolling more darkly on' seems to illustrate a sense of a decline or of decay, that the Sun is almost a kind of complicit observer in all this. The shooting and weaponized violence occurs in the day, under the watchful complicity of the sun above. The transition into night is a dark one, one that embraces dying warriors. If the day is the time for violence, the night is the

time for death, and in this we see a kind of cycle, one that digs into the cyclical nature of violence within the First World War. The line “the wild lament of their broken mouths” is such a captivating line, as it perfectly captures the agony of the dying soldiers, and makes a statement about communication and speech during wartime. The use of ‘wild’ here in conjunction with lament brings to mind a wild, uncontrollable frenzy of grief, and in terms of an army: a collective cry of terror. But the subsequent use of ‘broken mouths’ is interesting, as this is where the lament is coming from. How can such a strong and frenzied cry come from a broken mouth? The image of the soldiers having broken mouths is an interesting one, as these soldiers are the ones who are dying. In a way, do the broken mouths of the dying soldiers represent their inability to speak after witnessing the horror of war firsthand? Is this experience of the soldier a microcosm for collective European society after the First World War? Is the soldier with a broken mouth simply singing the lament of death, or is there something else that can be interpreted here? One possible interpretation that I would like to offer is that the soldier’s broken mouths represent, on the macro level, a world in which Romanticism has no place. When the woods are alive with the sound of gunfire and nature is subsumed by acts of violence, how can one exalt nature? Nature has been defiled by such acts. Nationalist Romanticism can also be seen as a kind of disillusioning force, one that beguiled the soldiers and led them like a piper to their untimely demise. The soldiers can be said to be lamenting, since they died for a false world. I believe that *Grodek* is making both of those statements about Romanticism; about how it has lost its place in a world baptized in blood, and how Romanticism was used as a kind of nationalist-political tool to rile up the soldiers. In a sense, the inability to use Romanticism as a medium of expression after the horrors of war is a kind of societal trauma. This inability was brought about by the horrors of war and of Romanticism’s nationalistic usages.

The first mention of blood that appears in *Grodek* comes first in an indirect form, with the color red clouding the area, which seems to be something akin to a mist or fog. A 'wrathful god' lives in this red cloud of blood, and this is a striking statement. Rather than a god being exalted by war, it seems that this 'wrathful god' has sprang from it. The violence of man has engendered a god of horrors into being. This 'wrathful god' could also be interpreted as nationalist or a kind of nationalist force that feeds off of the blood of sacrificed soldiers. In a later stanza, the word blood is overtly mentioned with the description of 'the blood that was shed', with a moon-coolness. Again we see night as a metaphor for death, with the moon's coolness also representing the coolness of death. The line 'all roads flow into black decay' is a line reminiscent of some of Trakl's earlier work, but the use of 'roads' here signifies a kind of artificiality or manufactured-ness of the flow, as the flow of decay follows a man-made road. This can be interpreted as human lives being funneled by paths molded by war.

But perhaps the most poignant part of *Grodek* (aside from the 'broken mouths') comes from the final lines of the poem. Within the poem there is this notion of a 'sister's shadow' that comes to greet the 'spirits of the heroes' (perhaps the soldiers who died in battle, since exalted as Heroes). The sister character here, though could possibly be referenced as a relative of the narrator or even of Trakl himself, is more likely a sister in the religious sense. What's interesting to note is the fact that the sister doesn't even visit the heroes herself, as her shadow is what passes over silently through the grove. This could be another analogy for death, but this could also have a more complex meaning. The sister's shadow could represent the absence of God in the midst of war, or the absence of a kind of religious closure for those soldiers who died in battle. Even in death, the soldiers have been beguiled by nationalism and abandoned by religion. It also can be said that the god of the sister is absent, as it's her shadow who visits the heroes, as

opposed to the wrathful god that lives in the blood-red clouds. Or are these gods the same? The spirits of the heroes' heads are said to be bleeding, and this image along with the detail of a 'broken mouth' leads to the conjuring of a mental image of the soldiers having misshapen, damaged bodies. With broken mouths and bleeding heads, the soldiers can do nothing more than lament their conditions.

The final lines of the poem are perhaps the most poignant parts of the whole piece, and ones that most acutely critique nationalism and romanticism. The end of the fifteenth line ends with 'you brazen altars', which seems to be some kind of critique or polemic remark. Who is the narrator speaking to or referring to here? Brazen means bold and without shame, and altar signifies some kind of religious imagery. Therefore, by attacking 'brazen altars' is the narrator criticizing those in power, effectively equating the soldier's death as a kind of sacrifice? Is this sacrifice to the god of wrath stated in the earlier lines, and is the narrator insinuating that those in power who beguiled the soldiers worship at an altar of blood? The following two lines add onto this point, with the notion of a spirit's ardent flame being fed with mighty grief. The flame being fueled here is a striking and complex image, and could be equated with a kind of nationalist flame. This flame is fed with the grief and death of fallen soldiers, and it is one that the nationalist forces maintain. The poem ends with a haunting final line: "The unborn generations". The soldiers sacrificed at the altar of nationalism cease to exist, and thus cannot live a life for themselves nor have children. War has extinguished their flame while maintaining another.

*Grodek* reads as a poignant rebuke of nationalized romanticism, and paints a picture of a world changed, one that cannot be described in terms of the old world. This poem, which was written at the Height of World War I, describes the horrors of war, and is a direct confrontation with the trauma that is produced from said horrors. There is even a polemical aspect of the poem,

attacking the elites or nationalist forces (and religious forces as well) that led the soldiers to their untimely demise. *Tynset*, by contrast, offers no such direct confrontation with trauma. Any perpetrators are treated with a kind of silent, subtle condemnation in the novel, and this bleeds into the main approach of the novel. *Tynset*'s way of dealing with trauma is more personalized, more subjective, one that speaks to the narrator's state of mind. *Grodek* reads as a direct confrontation with trauma, one where the narrator recounts tales of tragedy on the battlefield, and such vocabulary is interwoven in failed attempts to hark back to the days of romantic poetry. *Tynset*, by contrast, deals with trauma by pushing into the background as opposed to addressing it in the foreground. This approach puts the reader into the fractured state of the narrator, who is recovering from the trauma of the Second World War and the holocaust.

*Grodek*, as previously stated, was written during the First World War. *Tynset*, by contrast, was written and takes place in the years after the Second World War. An immediate comparison of the two works leads one to observe that there is no immediate violence within the novel, and all acts of violence occur outside of the present reality that the narrator recounts. There are two types of violence present in the novel: a historical violence that is connected to the Second World War, and stories recounted by the narrator. Despite the gruesomeness of some of the events in World War II, especially within the events presented by the narrator, the stories about the war are often glossed over. An example of pushing aside traumatic events can be seen when the narrator speaks of the city of Hamar (pg 10). After going over a brief description of the town the narrator recounts, after briefly forgetting, how a "german captain had thirteen of the town's residents hanged from lamposts... the captain was in a hurry... ended up shooting the last four on his own. Other than that, there really isn't anything more to say about Hamar." There are several things to note here. Firstly, it's striking how the narrator treats the horrific act of the killing of civilians as

some kind of trivial tidbit of information, something akin to facile information. Now, there is some separation of time in the recounting of this event, yet the murder of Gesualdo's wife and the plague story that the narrator later recounts are much further removed from the narrator's present time. Another example of this that is brought up and then subsequently dropped is the anecdote about a 'human skin-lampshade' (pg 85). This occurrence is a reference to the holocaust, yet it is never developed further. It is seemingly included as an additional bit of info, and then dropped, but why is this?

So why are these stories more gruesome in detail than actual events (Actual meaning that they actually happened as concrete events within the setting of the story. The plague story is made up by the narrator, and the Gesualdo story's gruesome detail, those based in historical reality, is embellished and exploited by the narrator to have a specific effect), and specifically events from World War II? My hypothesis for this is that the narrator of *Tynset* cloaks himself in violence that is either fictional or historical, and uses this as a means of coping with the more recent violence (relative to his time period). Both the plague story and the Gesualdo story are stories that are made distant by the passage of time, thus because they are removed they can be glamorized, embellished and utilized for effect. The more recent violence of the Second World War on the other hand, since they are so recent and within the realm of public consciousness, receives no such glamorization because it is so far removed. The gruesomeness of the narrators' stories are involved with a sense of purpose, with a sense of tone and atmosphere. This is compared to the relative senseless and targeted violence of the Second World War and the Holocaust. In a sense, the stories of the narrator can be said to offer some kind of escape for him, one that provides a kind of release of the Id through their gruesomeness, yet it is a release that is removed from any reconciliation. There is no purpose or meaning that can be interpreted from

the senseless violence of the war, and thus there is nothing for the narrator to unpack. Thus, the narrator mentally flees from this inexplicable violence, and retreats into a fantasy version of history where he can serve as the omnipresent narrator and creator of stories. The plague story (pg 119) is a perfect example of this kind of escapism, as he is in full control of the outcome of the story and the characters actions. Here, the narrator knows all about the characters, from where they came from, to their occupation and inner thoughts. With this in mind, he sends them to an untimely demise, an end result that he had planned for them, and a result done for an effect. Here he is in control, unlike in the real world, where he can only watch in confusion and horror. In his own bed, and the two beds of the two stories, he has control of information, something that there is a dearth of within the real world.

*Tynset* also confronts the topic of religion, in a similarly subtle way. Rather than use metaphors as *Grodek* did, *Tynset* uses a historical example, one that comes up as a random anecdotal piece of information, but one that serves a hidden purpose and meaning. The narrator recounts, from a picture he sees, the story of a cardinal's interaction with the German Minister of Defense (pg 61). The story points out a complicity between the cardinal and the minister, one that shows a collusion or engrament between the Nazi government and organized religion. In a later part of the book, the narrator recounts the same cardinal speaking to a large group of people gathered (pg 77). Here, it can be noted that the cardinal is possibly trying to convince the people to die for a 'holy' cause, to die for an abstract concept that has no present bearing on the current reality. Though they are at different points in time and different points with respect to war, this collusion between religion and government is seen in both *Tynset* and *Grodek*. In a way, this anecdote with the cardinal represents the malleability of religion, and how it was co-opted by nationalist interests. This example can also be said to be a criticism of romanticism, showing

how imaginary or abstract 'romantic' ideas can be utilized in order to send soldiers to their deaths. To die for an imagined concept, to die for nothing. Rather than an outright proclamation, *Tynset* chooses to do this indirectly via a story. It can also be noted that the character of the priest from the narrator's plague story (starting from page 119) can also be said to be a critique of religion, since he succumbs to lust before his death. Such as surrender to lust can be said to critique the hollowness of religious values, a hollowness that leaves it malleable by external sources. This is one possible interpretation, as there are many given the nature of the novel's constitution.

Both literary works are entangled by the concept of war and the trauma that can emerge as a result from witnessing horrors. Both works deal with trauma, but reflect different ways of dealing with this trauma, and this is due in part to the time in which they were written. The time in which they were written (and when they take place) determine the approaches they have towards war. *Grodek* was written during the First World War, and as a result, tackles the image of grotesque death head-on. The writing of the poem can be seen as an attempt to process the events, a processing that cannot happen within the medium of Romanticism. *Tynset*, by contrast, was written and takes place in the years after the Second World War, and is haunted by the specter of that war and of the Holocaust. *Tynset*, by the actions of the narrator, avoids an overt confrontation with the previous events. The book is interpreted as a way to deal with trauma, a way that involves retreating into a fantasy realm, a realm where meaning still exists. The death of Romanticism is something that can be felt within the two literary works. *Grodek* seems to have emerged from the cadaver of Romanticism, with Romanticism being an inefficient medium to communicate the horrors of war, as it is systemically incapable. It was also abused by nationalist forces to beguile and mislead. This notion of Romanticism being utilized in this way is also

present within *Tynset* as well. The death of Romanticism can also be thought of in conjunction with the death of meaning. In thinking as such, one can argue that the narrator has a deep dissatisfaction with the present, and via fantasy retreats into meaning. The time before the war had purpose and meaning, and to which the narrator retreats. In a way, both works try to make sense of mass death, and try to confront the senselessness and horror, not just of war, but of human cruelty. Both works overall encompass a search for meaning, for retribution, in the midst of the worst of humanity.