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**THE CONSTANCY of CHANGE:**

**The Role of the Paternoster in Grass's Ein weites Feld**

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Ein weites Feld is Grass's examination of German reunification within the context of Germany's turbulent history. By analyzing historical parallels to the history-making events of 1989-1991, Grass demonstrates that Germany's future is not ein weites Feld. Events are not fated to repeat themselves time and again. Of course, to find a new path, "den Dritten Weg" (409), one should approach the reunification with a strong dose of Grass's doubt. To this end, Grass reintroduces the literary icon Theodore Fontane and translates Fontane's *Gründerzeit* ambivalence to the person of present-day historian Theo Wuttke. Wuttke, called "Fonty" by all, has a career that spans from the Third Reich and serves above all as a model of Wiederkehr in recent history: "Fonty, den das Tausendjahrige Reich immer noch kränkte, blieb schroff: 'Hielt nur zwolf Jahre, wirft ab einen kolossal langen Schatten'" (67). This "shadow" cloaks the careers of Fonty and his Tagundachtschatten Hoftaller. Central to Grass's theme of perpetuity is the image of the *Paternoster* which is housed in the *Reichskultusministerium*. From the twelve years of the Reich to forty years of the DDR to the present-day Treuhand, Fonty and Hoftaller consider the building a second home. As Fonty maintains, "Mir gibt das ne gewisse Festigkeit. Weiß jedesmal, wenn ich hier antrab, wohin ich gehöre ..." (67). On a large scale, the *Paternoster* symbolizes the machinery of time that will not stand still. For protagonists Fonty and Hoftaller, the *Paternoster* squarely symbolizes a sense of personal survival within the system, regardless of the powers that be.

The reader is first introduced to the *Paternoster* in the fourth chapter, entitled "Viele Vaterunser lang":

Sogleich rückt ein Transportmittel ins Blickfeld, das seit Anbeginn in Betrieb war. Wir stellen uns den Aktenboten

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Thea Wuttke in einem nach vorne offenen Aufzug vor, der in zwei Fahrtrichtungen aus einer Vielzahl von Kabinen gereiht ist und unablässig, das heißt über die Wendepunkte im Keller- und Dachgeschoß hinweg, auf und ab fährt, ohne Halt, leicht klappernd, nicht ohne verhaltenes Gestöhn und Seufzen, aber doch zuverlässig, sagen wir ruhig "gebetsmühlenhaft"; weshalb man diesen altmodischen, inzwischen - trotz aller wohlmeinenden Proteste - fast überall ausgemusterten Personenaufzug "Patenoster« genannt hat. (75-76)

Grass goes beyond the obvious metaphor of the Paternoster's ascension and descent to the meaning behind the lift's Latin name: Our Father. That the Paternoster was installed during the Nazi regime implies the search for repentance and forgiveness: an endless chanting of The Lord's Prayer, "Our father who art in heaven...forgive us our trespasses..." Fonty must on some level repent for the war crimes of the Nazis. It is also in the Paternoster that Grass offers a detailed view of Fonty:

Er stieg aus der Tiefe auf, wurde in halber, dann in ganzer Person sichtbar, verschwand nach oben geköpft, halbiert, zeigte nur noch die hohen Schnürschuhe vor, war wie entschwunden, bestand aber darauf, ein Stockwerk höher in gleichbleibender Gestalt, weißhaarig, mit fuselndem Schnauz, sodann als Brustbild, schließlich nach halber in ganzer Figur einen Augenblick lang da zu sein. . . . (76)

At first, the image seems comical, even ridiculous. Yet Fonty is quite clearly a part of the machinery, a fixture of the former Reichsluftfahrtministerium. Stepping easily in and out of the Paternoster, Fonty's career has been a continual ride from political Stockwerk zu Stockwerk: "... nie hat jemand gesehen, daß Fonty beim Ein- oder Aussteig gestolpert oder gefallen wäre" (77).

In contrast, Hoftaller lacks Fonty's finesse. Whereas Fonty normally requires Hoftaller's direction, Grass offers an interesting twist in the co-dependent relationship. Fonty's rampant individualism must be contained by the state in the body of the Mephistophelian

Hoftaller: "Wir können doch anders" (539). Conversely, Hoftaller needs an artist-type like Fonty as a means of escape from affairs of state. Hoftaller needs Fonty to hold his hand. Grass may be suggesting that a person of the state such as Hoftaller, however cunning, lacks the freedom or flexibility of an artist type such as Fonty.

Despite Fonty's easy comings and goings in the Paternoster, Fonty is reduced to a gear in the machinery of the state when riding with Hoftaller. It is in the Paternoster where Hoftaller exercises his special rights and looks through Fonty's files. The notion of Vaterunser is clouded here. Instead of seeking repentance from the shadow of Nazism, Grass suggests that the GDR continues to oppress, reducing people to Apparatschiks:

Man nickte sich zu. Man hatte ein Wort für einander. Man ahnte, was man nicht wußte. Und viele, die mit ihm im Paternoster auf und ab fuhren, nannten ihn Fonty: "Nimmst kein Ende mit den Akten, was, Fonty?" "Was gibt's denn Neues, Fonty?" —"Immer schwer zu tragen, was, Fonty?" (84)

The passage indicates the "quiet knowing" of the government workers and their shared confines within an oppressive system. The state validates Theo Wuttke's identity as Fonty and, in the form of Hoftaller, confines him to the role of the Unsterblichen. However, Fonty is hardly Theodore Fontane's Unsterblichkeit; his Unsterblichkeit is nothing more than his endless job of Aktenbote.

The Paternoster reaches throughout the building, whether "in den Untergeschoß" (87) or "zum Labyrinth des Dachbodens" (103). It is in the basement where Fonty and Hoftaller dispose of Stasi files by stuffing them in an old sofa. Shortly thereafter the sofa mysteriously ends up in the attic. Most probably it was the Paternoster that facilitated this move. Despite the surrounding political intrigue of the powers that be, the Paternoster remains Fonty's refuge. Fonty and Hoftaller ride together in the lift before Fonty's first nervous breakdown. True to its name, the Paternoster serves as a quasi confessional, where Hoftaller "begnügte sich als Zuhörer" (192). This humanitarian compassion stands in direct contrast to Hoftaller's typical treatment of Fonty, i.e. using Fonty to get at confidential files while in the Paternoster. This contrast further supports this strange symbiosis that
exists between the two.

By the tenth chapter of the book, the reader can appreciate the overriding continuity in the lives and careers of Fonty and Hoftaller. Grass leaves the *Paternoster* motif to explore the concept of reunification in the second book, and in the third book Grass distances Fonty from Hoftaller. Yet once the joy of the reunification takes over, Grass revives the machinery of the *Paternoster* motif. Grass does this, lest people forget the past. At this point in the novel, the *Treuhand* has firmly established itself as “eine Treuhand, die zugriff” (485). In this sense, the oppressive kolossaler Schatten of the Third Reich remains, albeit on a much lesser scale. The *Treuhand* begins the process of abwickeln in the East, and it starts with the liquidation of the former Ministry building. The process of abwickeln can only be accomplished by means of the *Paternoster*, which again acts as an agent of change. The reader sees the Aktenbote Fonty as an active participant in this event, again adjusting smoothly to a new system that will be housed in the building. Finally, Grass directly links the *Treuhand* of the Nazi regime that seized property of the Jews with the *Treuhand* of the Federal Republic that is preparing to “seize” property of the former GDR. One is instantly aware of scale and must ask if Grass is justified in making such a connection. Can one compare an agency of the Federal Republic to one of Nazi Germany?

True to the spirit of abwickeln, the new inhabitants of the building consider replacing the *Paternoster* with elevators from the West. Brochures from the bidding companies “statistically prove” that a larger working force requires adequate transport. Keeping the *Paternoster*, while nostalgic, would only lower worker productivity and color the work ethic (504). One must admire how Grass illustrates the seductive power of statistics and jargon commonly found in advertising. Many of the herd mentality are easily taken in, but not the individualistic Fonty, who immediately starts a campaign to save the *Paternoster*. One asks why Fonty would not quietly celebrate the removal of the *Paternoster*, the last remaining shadow of the Third Reich. To this, Fonty offers a clear answer: “Besser langsam ans Ziel als beschleunigt ins Jenseit befordert!” (505). It is as if Grass summons protagonist Hermann Ott from his book *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* to speak through Fonty, thereby injecting a healthy dose of gray doubt into the Dionysian frenzy surrounding the reunification.

Thus the *Paternoster* motif carries another meaning, specifically one of a healthy, rational tempo with relation to reunification. With the help of his co-workers, most notably Hoftaller, Fonty is successful in saving the *Paternoster*, “at least until further notice” (505). Grass turns the occasion into a typical Western “photo-op.” Fonty’s co-workers applaud him. Although Fonty’s efforts were purely preservationist, saving the *Paternoster* has secured him — and Hoftaller — a position in the new government (530).

The visiting officials from the West have a patronizing view of Fonty. They smile courteously when Fonty refers to the *Paternoster* as a “Symbol der ewigen Wiederkehr” (526). Grass patterns the symbol of eternal recurrence from Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, where the eternal recurrence is an essential realization in the will to power (Wucherpfennig 196). Fonty, like the state, must endure eternal self-destruction and self-renewal in the process of self-realization. “Abriß gleich Aufbau. Alles mußte in Rekordzeit geschehen” (554). Question arises: Does Grass paint himself into a corner by introducing this concept of eternal recurrence? Does Grass mean to say that the oppression of the Gründerszeit, realized to a much greater extent in Nazi Germany, is destined to befall Germany again? Is Hoftaller correct when he maintains that “Im Prinzip ändert sich nichts?” (771).

In *Ein weites Feld*, as in his earlier works, Grass juxtaposes colossal world events to the mundane life events of the average person. Thus the reader’s perspective of the scale of events is enhanced. While walking through the empty renovated building, Fonty imagines “frischdekorierte Lufthelden” riding up and down in the *Paternoster* (556). This passage is followed by an interesting account of the rise and fall of the many dignitaries who have made their presence felt. From Aktenbote to Lufthelden to the highest officials, all have taken their place in the *Paternosters ewige Wiederkehr*. The head of the *Treuhand* will soon be counted among them. Exiting the *Paternoster* “mit sicherem Schritt” (565), Rohwedder is still on the way up figuratively and literally. This follows with Fonty’s detailed recollection of those who came before Rohwedder. Goering, Ulbrecht, and ultimately “Honni” appear one after the other. Rather than magnify their image, Fonty thinks of them as “ganz ein Fetta,” the “Spitzbart Sachwalter,” and “Honni mit Hütchen” (566-68). Grass treats this much like his depiction of Fonty from the first book: here
All too familiar with the dangers of euphemisms, Fonty becomes discouraged. “Alles Operieren mit Unendlichkeit und Unsterblichkeit ist mir zuwider” (653). Fonty again tries to break away to Scotland, the model country of his idol, Fontane; however, his Tagundnachtsschatten reigns in Fonty. This is too much for Fonty’s nerves, and he takes ill. In his delirium he says to Hoftaller: “Überall kolossale Happigkeit! Und schon wieder ist es ein Ismus, an den geglaubt werden soll” (697). Clearly Fonty is tiring of the ewige Wiederkehr.

At this point, Hoftaller’s assertion that “in principle, nothing changes” comes to mind, and the reader becomes anxious for answers to the questions surrounding this concept. When Hoftaller arranges a speech for Fonty at the Kulturbrauerei, Grass provides an end in sight to the weite Feld surrounding Germany’s future. The new Kulturbrauerei has been a site for German cultural events, among which include a Turkish children’s festival, the Jewish New Year Festival, and a festival celebrating the end of the Islamic Ramadan (745). Clearly, German culture is being re-defined, not repeated, and there is a sense of hope that Germany will overcome the ewige Wiederkehr in terms of cultural intolerance.

Fonty is immediately well received as he begins his speech. He holds fast to the script and talks about Neuruppin, Fontane’s place of birth, and the Kleineleutentumilien (748), but soon pushes his script to the side, removes his glasses, and speaks off the cuff. Fonty continues and the crowd grows restless, telling Fonty to get to the point. Fonty focuses on the Treuhand and delivers a fictitious scenario in which Fontane’s characters celebrate the thousandth Abwicklung of East German property in the Treuhand. Naturally, the theme centers around Fontane’s Kommerzienrat: “Frau Jenny Treibel läßt bitten” (751). As head of the Treuhand in the fictitious scenario, Jenny Treibel’s false sentimentality allows her to combine business and literature. Fonty warns that even Corinna Schmidt from Frau Jenny Treibel will soon join in the dance, implying a total bankruptcy of culture (753). The crowd loves the imagery and calls out names of characters who should also appear at this celebration. At this point, Fonty introduces the Paternoster, as one by one Fontane’s characters enter the crowded cabins. Fonty returns to his speech for a while and discusses fire images from Fontane’s novels: the burning Scheune in Kinderjahre and in
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Vor dem Sturm, and the burning of Tangermünde in Grete Minde. From this Fonty returns to the Treuhand building where, among other events, Botho from Irrungen, Wirrungen burns Lene’s letters: “das geschah vor den Augen vieler illustre Gäste in einer der holzverkleideten Kabinen des unablässigten Paternosters” (757). Soon the public hears sirens, and it appears as if Fonty’s rhetoric has set the Treuhand ablaze. Ironically, Hofaller announces that there is a fire at the Treuhand. The thin line between reality and fiction indicates the power of literature. The interesting contrast of the historic Fontane and the fictive Treibel serves to underscore literature’s power. The Paternoster refers to the ewige Wiederkehr of German history, and Fontane’s Auffahrt is another parallel between Gründerzeit Germany and Germany of the Wende. Fontane is the cultural legacy who stands in contrast to Jenny Treibel, prototype of the capitalist Grundmanns who appear in Ein weites Feld.

The fire in the Treuhand does not consume the building, but does spell the end of the Paternoster. An inspection committee judges the Paternoster to be highly dangerous, and the Paternoster will be replaced by the elevators from the West. Thus, the tempo of reunification gains momentum. Fonty, like the Paternoster, is a discontinued model, and is dismissed by the Treuhand. With the burning of the Paternoster, the ewige Wiederkehr is broken and Fonty is freed. With the title of the last chapter, “Mit ein wenig Glück,” Grass implies that Hofaller was incorrect in saying that in principle, nothing changes. Truly, with a little luck, Germany could still stumble upon den Dritten Weg.

Now freed from his duties at the Treuhand, Fonty and his granddaughter Madeleine escape Hofaller. True to his epithet, the Tagundnachtshatten finds them at the Spreepark in Berlin. Hofaller realizes that it is time to part with Fonty, and asks Madeleine if it would be all right if he and Fonty could ride alone in the Ferris wheel. The huge Ferris wheel suggests the same eternal recurrence as the Paternoster. It is on this substitute Paternoster that Fonty and Hofaller have their last private conversation. After the ride is over, Fonty hugs Hofaller (778). The two halves, West and East, have made peace with one another. Grass ends the novel on a highly optimistic note. It is as if the ewige Wiederkehr prescribed to German history went up in flames along with the Paternoster. Now living in France with his granddaughter, Fonty corrects his idol, saying that Briest was incorrect: “Ich jedenfalls sehe dem Feld ein Ende ab ...” (781). Fonty is taking a new direction, and the reader is left with a strong sense of optimism that the same will be true for the united Germany.

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