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THE CONSTANCY of CHANGE: The Role of the *Paternoster* in Grass's *Ein weites Feld*

David Prickett

E*in 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 re-unification with a strong dose of Grass's doubt. To this end, Grass reinvents 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 Tausendjährige Reich immer noch kränkte, blieb schroff: 'Hielt nur zwölf Jahre, wirft aber einen kolossal langen Schatten'" (67). This "shadow" cloaks the careers of Fonty and his *Tagundnachtschatten* Hoftaller. Central to Grass's theme of perpetuity is the image of the *Paternoster* which is housed in the *Reichsluftfahrtministerium*. 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 antrabe, 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

Theo 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 Gestöhne und Seufzen, aber doch zuverlässig, sagen wir ruhig "gebetsmühlenhaft"; weshalb man diesen altmodischen, inzwischen - trotz aller wohlmeinenden Proteste - fast überall ausgemusterten Personenaufzug »Paternoster« 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 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 Ausstieg 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 füreinander. Man ahnte, was man nicht wußte. Und viele, die mit ihm im Paternoster auf und ab fuhren, nannten ihn Fonty: "Nimmt 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; 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 Jenseits befördert!" (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 (Wucherpennig 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 *Gründerzeit*, 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

the giants of history look rather ridiculous, descending from above piece by piece. It is almost as if they are being picked apart and analyzed by the common man in the form of Fonty. The concept of eternal recurrence clearly comes into play here. The state is constantly being redefined through "ewige Selbstzerstörung und neue Selbstschöpfung" (Wucherpfennig 197). The *Wende* is therefore just another phase of this process. It is also Grass's reference to scale that makes this passage so important. With every ascend and descent of the *Paternoster*, the powers that be seem to decline in importance. Goering, known the world over for his claim that no enemy bombs would ever fall on Berlin, is followed by GDR officials Ulbrecht and Honni. Although important in German history, their names do not carry nearly the same weight on an international scale. Grass specifically excludes certain persons from Fonty's "Filmrolle" (567). In an earlier passage, Fonty exclaims: "Nie ... hat der Genosse Mielke den Paternoster benutzt!" (576). Fonty says this in connection with a passage from Fontane's *Wanderungen*. Obviously, Fonty shares Fontane's dislike for internal spies. Yet it might have been interesting to include a figure like Mielke in the *Paternoster*, as the *Stasi* was clearly a shadow of oppression from the Third Reich. Grass ends the passage with the appearance of Rohwedder, and Fonty is correct in saying that Rohwedder could never fill the "kolossale Machtfülle" (568), given those who have come before the head of the *Treuhand*.

True to life, Rohwedder's murder comes to pass. Hoftaller and Fonty share a ride in the *Paternoster*, where Fonty trusts himself to ask the question: Was Hoftaller behind the murder? Hoftaller maintains that "Diese System erledigt sich selbst," implying that Rohwedder was too weak for the job (630). Birgit Breuel, Rohwedder's successor, comes under heavy fire by Grass: "das Volkstum wurde zügiger und in schärferer Gangart abgewickelt: Was mal Osten gewesen war, ging Stück für Stück in westlichen Besitz über" (636). Focusing on the quick liquidation of public property, the *Treuhand* declines Fonty's suggestion to write a history of the building. Although the new head of the *Treuhand* is not directly responsible for this decision, linking the *Treuhand* with the former powers is frowned upon as "bad PR" by the West. Instead of documenting the history of the building, the *Treuhand* assigns Fonty the job of finding a euphemism for *abwickeln*.

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 *Tagundnachtschatten* reigns in Fonty. This is too much for Fonty's nerves, and he takes ill. In his delirium he says to Hoftaller: "Überall kolossale Hapigkeit! 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 *Kleineleutemilieu* (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 *Kommerzienrätin*: "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

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 illustrierter Gäste in einer der holzverkleideten Kabinen des unablässigen Paternosters" (757). Soon the public hears sirens, and it appears as if Fonty's rhetoric has set the *Treuhand* ablaze. Ironically, Hoftaller 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 Hoftaller 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 Hoftaller. True to his epithet, the *Tagundnachtschatten* finds them at the Spreepark in Berlin. Hoftaller 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 Hoftaller have their last private conversation. After the ride is over, Fonty hugs Hoftaller (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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