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Ein weites Feld as Post–Cold War Novel

SCOTT MCCRACKEN

Günter Grass's novel *Ein weites Feld*¹ caused a storm of controversy when it was published in Germany in 1995, a storm comparable—in terms of text generated if not geographic reach or danger to the author—to the *Satanic Verses* affair in the 1980s. Perhaps this was not surprising, since the novel addressed itself to the new, reunified Germany. It opens with its two protagonists Theo Wuttke (known to his friends as “Fonty”) and Ludwig Hoftaller examining the recently breached wall, which “already looked porous, exposing its innards: reinforcing rods that would soon rust” (7). Given his reputation, a substantial part of Grass's audience must have expected the novel to answer the question of what might now constitute a national literature. Strong feelings were bound to be provoked. However, the controversy raises as many questions about the novel as a literary form as it does about the political context into which it was launched, not least because *Ein weites Feld* was a conscious attempt to use novelistic form as a kind of cultural politics, deployed against both a resurgent German nationalism and all those invested in an ideological interpretation of the end of the Cold War as a victory for the West.

Yet if one of the aims of Grass's novel was to pit the literary against ideology, *Ein weites Feld* might also be read as a meditation on the difficulty of achieving a literary language that can escape the bonds of ideology. The theme of collaboration runs through the text: language's collaboration with power, the collaboration of artists with the state and of literature with the perspective of the victor. If Grass begins from the position that it is the artist's responsibility to side with the vanquished, he also seems acutely conscious that such a position will always be compromised.

Despite this, Grass finds some salvation in literary form, notably in the novel's ability to posit what Jacques Rancière in *Politique de la littérature* calls “un monde commun” (a common world) (39).² An optimistic reading of *Ein weites Feld* might say that it shows the potential still existing in the novel to expand and deepen not just the language of literature but also the language of politics for such a community. As Rancière puts it, in a neat riposte to the classic Marxist formula, “interpretations are themselves real changes when they transform the forms of visibility a common world may take and, with them, the capacities that ordinary bodies may exercise in that world over a new landscape of the common” (*Politics of Literature* 30; translation modified). *Ein weites Feld* strives for a literary language that might make visible such a democratic “common world.” It reaches back to the history of the German and the European novel to demonstrate the “wide field” from which a new post–Cold War culture might draw. It leans heavily on the rich resources of the

¹ Except when stated otherwise, all quotations from Grass's novel are from Krishna Winston's translation, *Too Far Afield*. However, because the title loses its allusive qualities in English, I refer to the book by the German title throughout.

² Although Rancière does not quote her, he is probably invoking Hannah Arendt's concept of a “common world” in *The Human Condition*.

German tradition, specifically on the work of nineteenth-century novelist Theodor Fontane. Grass's title is taken from the favorite phrase of the father in *Effi Briest*: "Es ist ein weites Feld," and the novel's Quixotic hero, "Fonty," is (as part of a complex literary joke) a reincarnation of Fontane himself.

This debt notwithstanding, Grass's literary field extends beyond Germany to the history of the novel as a European and (implicitly) a world form. It deploys novelistic discourse, in the Bakhtinian sense of an allusive, unstable, and dialogic language, as a counter to ideological and national limits. The text is impatient with borders: those between texts, between the cultural and political, and even the border between literature and history; it revels in its hero's "Bovaryism," his apparent inability to distinguish between fiction and reality. Grass uses all the resources at his disposal from the long history of the novel to make visible the potential for a new post-Cold War community, one that is conscious of its heterogeneous and impure past and that therefore might embrace history's lost causes as well as the victor's truth.

A National Scandal

Early reviews described *Ein weites Feld* as "boring" and "unreadable" (Negt, "Vorwort" 7). One of Germany's best known critics, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, was pictured in a photomontage on the cover of *Der Spiegel* tearing the novel in two, and it was subject to a roasting on the television program *Das Literarische Quartett* on August 24, 1995 (Negt, *Der Fall Fonty* 39). Why the strong reactions? As Oskar Negt's *Der Fall Fonty* (a 495-page anthology of reviews, articles, and commentaries on the novel) amply documents, two aspects gave offence. First, the way the novel delves into Germany's past, exploring areas and periods the new nation would rather forget. Second, it is written from the point of view of the East. This alone was enough to ensure that both the author and novel would come under attack. Grass was accused of stepping outside the role of the writer into the realm of the "political." Yet this was a strange charge, as his role as a political figure was hardly new. He had long used his position as a prominent novelist to make public interventions (Braun 3–6), at least some of which had been welcomed in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). The political stance of his first novel, *The Tin Drum* (1959) had lent cultural legitimacy to the rather thin antifascist credentials of the West German state at a time when its moral authority was weak and challenged by the overt antifascism of its communist other half, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) (Herf). Conveniently, Grass's anticommunist credentials were also good. A longtime member of the Social Democratic Party, he publicly supported dissident East German writers and in 1966 wrote a play, *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising*, that was critical of Bertolt Brecht's role in the workers' uprising in East Berlin in 1953.

In his public utterances, Grass had always refused to sit, politically or culturally, within the boundaries of the state of which he was a citizen, denying both the logic of Cold War division and the lure of reunification. His Danzig trilogy (*The Tin Drum*, *Cat and Mouse* [1961], and *Dog Years* [1963]) sought to secure in memory Germany's lost Eastern territories without succumbing to the nostalgic nationalism

1 of the German Right. Instead, he adopted a position of “Two States—One Nation,”
 2 which questioned Germany’s moral right to a single state yet argued for a common
 3 German culture (Grass, “Germany—Two States, One Nation?”). Given his political
 4 history, it would have been naive to expect his first major novel after reunification to
 5 affirm the legitimacy of the new state. Instead of reinventing a national myth, Grass
 6 chose to bring, in Negt’s words, “much that was buried and forgotten to light”
 7 (“Vorwort” 7; my translation).³

8 In addition and as Negt sees it, “Günter Grass,” to his credit, “puts himself
 9 consciously on the side of the losers, that is the side on which almost all writers of
 10 great literature put themselves” (17). The novel’s critics pronounced Grass soft on
 11 the GDR, even a mouthpiece for the East German regime. For Negt, the charges
 12 against the novel revealed the changing nature of the literary public sphere in the
 13 new Germany: a tradition of rational criticism had been lost along with the belief
 14 that the literary novel might itself be a player in a democratic culture of argument
 15 and debate (11–14). Yet despite its critics, *Ein weites Feld* was read, or at least bought,
 16 by thousands of Germans, reaching the bestseller lists. Sales were fueled by the
 17 sheer quantity of discussion the novel generated.

18 After the Cold War

21 That the novel was received better in the East than in the West suggests a complex
 22 relationship between *Ein weites Feld* and its various publics (Dieckmann 371)—one
 23 related not just to the new Germany but to the novel as a post–Cold War text as well.
 24 Like many dissident intellectuals during the Cold War, Grass had tried to resist
 25 incorporation by either side. *Ein weites Feld* can be read both as a continuation of
 26 that dissident tradition and as an attempt to write for a new postconflict audience.

27 According to Eric Hobsbawm, the “forty years of Cold War . . . conformed to
 28 Hobbes’s definition of war as consisting ‘not in battle only or in the act of fighting,
 29 but in a tract of time wherein the will to contend in battle is sufficiently known’”
 30 (16). Those forty years hardly lacked actual conflicts, but they were fought as proxy
 31 wars outside Europe, in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In Europe itself, the
 32 situation was one of military and political deadlock. Until 1989, the Cold War was,
 33 in Tony Judt’s words, generally understood as the product of “the iron logic of
 34 politics” rather than as one of the “accidental outcomes of history. Lived experience
 35 was subject to the dominant world views—to ‘ideological necessity’” (2).

36 Grass had tried to evade this “iron logic.” Before the Wall went up, he had been
 37 part of a group of writers who met in the district of Prenzlauer Berg in East Berlin,
 38 and he had continued to cross over to the East to meet with this group when the
 39 neighborhood ended up on that side after 1961. After 1989, he tried to maintain
 40 his distance from the new “victor’s” truth, keeping alive the skepticism he had
 41 cultivated during the Cold War. In the early 1990s, he maintained a consistently
 42 neutral position, refusing to join in the witch hunt of East German writers, such as
 43 Christa Wolf, who were accused of complicity with the GDR’s Ministry for State
 44 Security, known colloquially as the Stasi. This left him open to attack. For dissident

45
 46 ³ All translations of Negt’s text are mine.

intellectuals on both sides of the geographic divide during the Cold War, to be nonaligned, as Grass tried to be, was to be tactical rather than strategic. It was possible to occupy but not to hold ground. Periods of absorption or capitulation were almost inevitable.

One of the remarkable things about *Ein weites Feld* is that rather than erase the memory of the compromises and collaborations that were part of the experience of the Cold War, it puts them in the foreground, finding in the novel form a way to articulate the experiences with which a post-Cold War community needs to come to terms. As a result, the media storm the novel provoked cannot be explained just by Grass's politics, which were known well before publication. It was as much the novel itself—as a literary, specifically *novelistic* intervention into the politics of reunification—that provoked the scandal. The potential of the novel form to make visible what has been buried and forgotten allowed *Ein weites Feld* to challenge the narrative of the end of the Cold War as a victory for the West.

The Novel

Ein weites Feld is novelistic in the Bakhtinian sense of having an internal structure of multiple, contradictory, and overlapping narratives. Its heteroglossia⁴ reflects an internally stratified German culture, but the text's impatience with borders pushes it beyond the national to the novel as an international form. Despite the governing conceit that the novel's hero, Fonty, is Theodore Fontane, *Ein weites Feld* takes its cue from the founding text of the European novel tradition, *The Adventures of Don Quixote*.

Just as *Don Quixote* is made up of a series of adventures in which its protagonists travel across Spain, so *Ein weites Feld* is composed of excursions that gradually lengthen, beginning with walks within Berlin itself but then extending by Trabi beyond the city to the rest of the territory of the former GDR. The two key protagonists Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are recreated in *Ein weites Feld* as septuagenarian East German citizens Theo Wuttke, or Fonty, and Ludwig Hoftaller. Fonty, a former lecturer in the East German Cultural Union and now "file-carrier" in the East German Ministries Building, is as "tall and thin" as Hoftaller (6), a Stasi agent and Fonty's "day-and-night-shadow" (*Tagundnachtschatten*) is "short and squat" (3, 6). Where Sancho Panza's earthy realism acts to bring Don Quixote, the personification of novelistic excess, back to earth from his flights of fancy, Hoftaller's hold on Fonty is more sinister. He uses a combination of jocular and threats to prevent Fonty's escape from his surveillance. As Grass's illustrations of the two (which appear on the various editions of the novel) and the text itself continually remind us, their forms are indivisible: "The outlines of their hats and coats, of dark felt and gray wool blend, converged into a unit that grew larger and larger as it approached. The paired phenomenon seemed unstoppable" (6); "[n]o literary trick could separate them" (85).

⁴ For an account of the slipperiness of this term and the various ways in which it has been translated, see David Shepherd.

1 *Ein weites Feld* borrows and adapts not just Cervantes's characters but also his
 2 method of uncertain and unreliable narrative attribution. Where the original author
 3 of *Don Quixote* is said to be the Arab historian Cide Hamete Benengeli (Cervantes 77),
 4 the narrators of *Ein weites Feld* are a chorus of archivists from the Theodor Fontane
 5 archive in Berlin. These "extant footnote slaves" (*übriggebliebenen Fußnotensklaven*) (6)
 6 usually speak collectively, though occasionally through a single female voice. If the
 7 adventures of Don Quixote become available through fragments of text, then the
 8 records of the archivists in Grass's novel are incomplete and their knowledge patchy.
 9 Although they are physically present for parts of the narrative, the archivists often
 10 have to fall back on reports and letters.

11 The novel's many intertexts, of which *Don Quixote* is just one, extend its meaning
 12 beyond immediate time and place so that, even though its characters never leave
 13 German territory, German culture is always entangled with other cultures. Just as
 14 *Don Quixote* records the history and breadth of the culture of the recently Chris-
 15 tianized Iberian peninsula so that Islamic and Jewish traditions erupt within what
 16 will become the new national literature, Grass's "wide field" positions a local
 17 (narrow) geography (Berlin) and recent history (the fall of the Wall) in relation to a
 18 wide European and global geography (the geography of the Cold War) and a long
 19 German and European (and, arguably, world) history. In effect, Grass makes good
 20 and extends Mikhail Bakhtin's comment that the "national literary language of a
 21 people with a highly developed art of prose, especially if it is novelistic prose with a
 22 rich and tension-filled verbal-ideological history, is in fact an organized microcosm
 23 that reflects the macrocosm not only of national heteroglossia, but of European
 24 heteroglossia as well" (295).

25 Thus the novel's title—which, like much of the text, is a quotation from Fontane—
 26 does not aim to establish literary authority so much as to muddy it, eschewing a
 27 single perspective or an authoritative narrative voice in favor of dialogue and dis-
 28 sension. The reference to *Effi Briest* introduces a view of unification as an unhappy
 29 marriage between an older, powerful man and a young, inexperienced wife. "Es ist
 30 ein weites Feld," Herr Briest's overused phrase, recurs in the face of any social sit-
 31 uation he cannot comprehend (Fontane [1975] 28–29, 31, 32, 94, 146, 231). The lit-
 32 eral translation is "it is a wide field"; the figurative meaning is closer to "it is too vast
 33 a subject."

34 *Ein weites Feld's* provocation lies not just in giving a voice to the "loser's side" but
 35 in its attempt to represent the fall of the Wall in terms of a very wide and a very long
 36 field, including the breadth of the European novel, and in terms of two hundred
 37 years of German history, including those parts—such as nineteenth-century anti-
 38 Semitism and the Nazi period—that the new Germany would rather put behind it.
 39 As Fonty remarks, "Die Wahrheit ist ein weites Feld"—"The truth is a vast subject"
 40 (*Ein weites Feld* 140);⁵ Grass writes a novel in which the text deliberately exceeds the
 41 reader's grasp, both in terms of the complexity of the situation and in recognition
 42 that the truth will always include much that cannot be represented. In effect, the
 43 text requires a public that is prepared to see beyond the easy, ideological limits of
 44 meaning.

45
 46 ⁵ Winston translates this as "The truth takes one far afield" (114).

Fonty/Fontane

Even while the reader is coming to terms with Fonty (born in 1919) as Don Quixote, he or she has to grasp his relationship to Theodor Fontane (1819–98), from whom he derives his nickname. Both the archivists who look after the Fontane archive and Fonty himself collaborate in a deliberate textual confusion between the two men. The archivists treat Fonty as a kind of living source, his vast knowledge of the nineteenth century seemingly giving him access to information they do not have. Fonty himself often speaks as if he were Fontane at 170 years old, drawing on memories that extend back to the mid-nineteenth century. This literary joke is so widespread and so widely accepted that his friends and acquaintances commonly substitute Fontane's life for Fonty's: "[A]ctually many people who crossed his path would say things like 'So, Fonty, heard from Friedlaender [a friend of Fontane's] recently? And how is your fine daughter? There's a rumour afoot, and not just in Prenzlberg, that Mete's [the name of Fontane's daughter] tying the knot. Any truth to it, Fonty?'" (3).

The boundary between the two is blurred further because Fonty not only physically resembles his hero, but Fonty's wife and children also reflect Fontane's family. Fonty's friend Freundlich corresponds to Fontane's Jewish friend Friedlaender. Moreover, just as Fonty quotes Fontane at every opportunity, so Grass arguably mimics Fontane's style.⁶ Fonty's life in the twentieth century consequently reads like a distorted mirror image of Fontane's nineteenth-century experience. Fonty's sympathy with the workers' uprising in East Berlin in 1953 is a reflection of Fontane's dalliance with radical politics in 1848. Fonty's wartime intelligence gathering for the Aviation Ministry and secret aid to the French resistance suggestively parallel Fontane's war reporting and possible espionage during the Franco-Prussian conflict of 1870. Like Fontane, Fonty has fathered an illegitimate child. Reunification under Helmut Kohl mirrors the first unification under Bismarck, about which Fontane was skeptical. Fonty's cultural affinities mirror and develop those of Fontane. He makes much of Fontane's Huguenot heritage and his European frame of reference: his enthusiasm for Scotland derives from Walter Scott but also from Dickens and Thackeray. It is left to Fonty's granddaughter by his wartime French lover to remember Fontane's relationship with Russian literature (383–85). Fonty's cultural heritage is as pan-European as the wide audience the novel addresses.

The result of the Fonty/Fontane overlap is deliberate confusion for the unwary reader, who will at first mistake Fonty for the actual Fontane, still alive in the late twentieth century. Their two biographies, one "historical" and one literary, are in dialogue, much like the first and second parts of *Don Quixote*. In *Ein weites Feld*, Fonty's narrative acts as a biologically impossible but historically revealing Second Part of Fontane's life, throwing key moments in the German twentieth century into relief. Indeed, the novel would amount to a joyful literary trick were it not for Hoftaller, whose shadow projects from the darker side of German history.

⁶ Jörg Magenau mischievously suggests that Grass has always written like Fontane but that we simply have not noticed ("Geheimdienst" 117).

Hoftaller/Tallhover

Where Fonty's alter ego is drawn from the historical Fontane and his fiction, Hoftaller's immediate origins are in the literature of the GDR. Grass lifts the character from Hans Joachim Schädlich's 1986 novel *Tallhover*, swapping the two parts of the name so that Tallhover becomes Hoftaller (5). Schädlich was part of the group of East German writers with whom Grass used to meet privately in the East to read work in progress. Because of its critical stance, his work was never published in the GDR, only achieving publication when he and his family were given the right to move to the West in 1977.

Schädlich's novel is a dark Kafkaesque tale about an apparently immortal secret policeman, Tallhover, whose service to a series of repressive German states, from Prussia onward, we are invited to compare with the GDR. Born, like Fontane, in 1819, Tallhover begins his career spying on Karl Marx and the radicals involved in publishing the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. After 1871, he continues his work for the newly unified German Empire. This extends into the twentieth century, and Schädlich's novel narrates his long career, beginning with his surveillance of the Bolsheviks and a role securing Lenin's passage through Germany to the Finland Station in 1917. His professional life continues after the First World War as Tallhover moves with ease into the Gestapo, where one of his duties is to guard Stalin's son as a prisoner of war. He slips seamlessly into the Stasi (despite evidence of his involvement in the murder of wounded Soviet prisoners of war), continuing his defense of the German state despite its political colors until 1953, when his zeal during the workers' uprising causes him to be reassigned to the archives. In 1955, he suffers a breakdown and retires to his house, where he reproaches himself for having failed to make the service more effective—regretting in particular the aid given to Lenin. Retreating to his cellar, he puts himself on trial and condemns himself to death. The novel ends ambivalently, but the reader might reasonably assume that he carries out the sentence: "He closes his mouth, opens his mouth, says something, does not hear his voice. He shouts, but only hears himself whisper, Why does no one come? Why does nobody help me? Comrades! Come! Help me! Kill me!" (Schädlich 283; my translation).⁷ Grass, however, exploits the lack of an explicit end to Tallhover's life to extend his narrative into *Ein weites Feld*, where the renamed Hoftaller disputes the version given by Schädlich, to whom he refers as his "biographer" (55). Hoftaller claims he did not commit suicide but rather went over to the West in 1955, returning with his new name after the construction of the Wall. Thus where the line between Fonty and Fontane can at least be dimly perceived, the line between Hoftaller and Tallhover is never so clear. Both are fictions. As with Fonty, Hoftaller and others refer to his former "historical" self as part of an extended life.

In Schädlich's novel, Tallhover represents the logic of the totalitarian state, which eventually turns on itself, destroying its own existence. In the aftermath of the Cold War and the demise of the GDR, his character can easily be read as a representation

⁷ There is no published English translation of Schädlich's novel.

of pure evil, the destruction of whom can only be good, the happy ending of a morality tale; but this is to read Tallhover in one way only. If his loyal service to both the Nazis and the East German state is a judgment on the GDR, his surveillance of Communists in the Weimar Republic and his work under the Kaiser and earlier for Prussia condemns those states too. Schädlich disrupts the idea of a safe “before” (before Communism, before Nazism) to which a new Germany might return; it is this unflinching view of German history that Grass takes up and extends in Hoftaller. Whereas Schädlich’s ending and personal history might be read as marking a clear line between the FRG and the repressive German state, Grass insists that reunification is not a reason to forget the past. Schädlich’s claustrophobic narrative never defines an alternative, which, in the context of the Cold War, could too easily be assumed to be the FRG and the West. Grass’s Hoftaller lives on in more jocular mode to question the binaries of West and East, good and evil. He has worked for both sides during the Cold War and hints that the new German state is finding his expertise useful.

Whereas the new Germany might prefer to see Hoftaller as unqualified evil, Grass’s extension of his fictional life beyond Schädlich’s text works to keep his meaning in play. *Ein weites Feld* engages with its intertexts not as authorities but by reopening their own moments of textual ambivalence. For example, tracing the origin of the novel’s title, we find that even the meanings of the words in *Effi Briest* are uncertain. As the phrase of last resort used by Effi’s father, it is an expression of his inability or perhaps unwillingness to engage with the full import of events, in particular the unhappiness of his daughter’s marriage. The novel’s final words, “Ah Luise, that’s enough . . . that is *too wide a field*” (Fontane [2000] 217), close down a conversation with his wife as she begins to blame both herself and her husband for Effi’s disgrace and early death.

At the end of Fontane’s text, the wide field gestured to is the “hors-texte”: that which lies beyond the novel itself and the narrow morality of the society it describes. It is this wide field, which we might read as analogous to Rancière’s “common world,” that Grass embraces. Briest’s failure, which could be taken as an example of his moral cowardice, is used to gesture to the vast world that exists beyond the bourgeois family, where the moral frame that has condemned Effi becomes meaningless. In *Ein weites Feld*, the narrow field is the ideological force field of the Cold War, with its hardening rhetoric of victory and defeat. In the dialogic relationship between Fonty and Hoftaller, these categories are undone: Fonty, it turns out, is an occasional informant as well as a free spirit, surveilled and surveillant; Hoftaller is as much a literary creation as Fonty. In the relationship between state and subject, the balance of power is clear but the dividing line is not.

This is nowhere more apparent than in what has become the most controversial statement in the novel. Fonty’s comment that “we lived in a comfy [*kommoden*] dictatorship” (270)⁸ has been used as evidence—beyond doubt for Grass’s critics—of his unaccountable softness on the GDR. In an interview published in 1996, Grass

⁸ Winston’s use of “comfy” to translate *kommoden* preserves the word’s old-fashioned inflection in German but misses a possible allusion to Thomas Hobbes’s “commodious living.”

1 responded with two answers: one political and one literary. First he defended the
2 statement as a historically accurate description of the GDR:
3

4 *[I]f I compare the situation in the GDR with the ways things were in the Soviet Union*
5 *for a long time, or as they were in Romania until the end, or in Chile, or in Greece*
6 *under the Colonels, then the GDR was a relatively comfy dictatorship. It was still a*
7 *dictatorship, but that's not enough for the mentality that has expressed itself in some*
8 *of these criticisms and likes to exaggerate the victory it thinks it has won. Thus the*
9 *defeated adversary, an adversary who no longer really exists, is made more dangerous*
10 *in retrospect to increase the sense of victory. This is basically a very odd and foolish*
11 *process. (Grass, Famler, and Kaindlestorfer; my translation)⁹*
12

13 Yet in the same interview, he points out that the statement is delivered by Fonty, a
14 character in a novel, and that Fonty is himself quoting a letter written by Fontane to
15 his wife, which describes his unhappiness with the first unification: "There [Fon-
16 tane] laments eloquently and angrily about the depravity of the Prussian nobility,
17 about the parvenu children of the bourgeoisie, about the eternal reserve lieutenants
18 etc., everything that irritated him about his time, and then, in a typically Fontanian
19 way, he qualifies it all and says: 'And despite this, we have to say, we live in a
20 comfy dictatorship.'" What are we to make of these two apparently contradictory
21 responses? In the context of the novel we can see that the first response is framed
22 within the political discourse proper to Hoftaller: it is realist, even cynical. The
23 second answer is a defense of literary discourse itself, the nuances of which are lost
24 when a single statement is substituted for the "heteroglot, multi-voiced, multi-
25 styled and often multi-linguaged elements" of the novel (Bakhtin 265). Fonty's
26 words, as a repetition of Fontane's, invite us to read reunification critically against
27 the history of the first unification and its consequences. The myth of a return to a
28 national destiny is interrupted and disturbed. If those same words change their
29 meaning when applied to the GDR, their slipperiness opens up a more general
30 questioning of state power. Through the statement's "novelization," both the
31 experience of the GDR and the new state are relativized in terms of a long history.
32 Yet Grass's first, political defense is an acknowledgment that a purely literary
33 defense is not enough. Literature can never entirely free itself from the demands of
34 politics, which will always bring it to task. Hoftaller, as representative of the
35 ideological in the novel, will always limit Fonty's aspirations to the merely literary.
36

37 This is the case even at those moments in the novel when literary language
38 appears briefly to break free from meaning. In book 3, Fonty engages in a battle of
39 literary quotations with his French granddaughter Madeleine (from a liaison in
40 occupied France), whose argument for national unity is matched by Fonty's for
41 separation. The debate is also about the boundary between meaning and nonsense:
42

43 *[T]he clash of views between grandfather and granddaughter became evident. From*
44 *the French perspective, unification and the nation were a fait accompli. "And basta!"*
45 *Madeleine exclaimed.*
46

⁹ All translations from the Grass, Famler, and Kaindlestorfer text are mine.

A declared enemy of “dusty Borussianism,” Fonty was still enough of a Prussian to dismantle any unity into its smallest parts and dismiss the concept of the nation as a chimera, preferring a proper constitution, characterized, to the extent possible, by reason. “There’s no question that what we lack is a constitution that would be a good fit for us, not merely for the West.” (384–85)

As the dispute intensifies, language itself divides: “Madeleine Aubron, in the heat of this battle of nations, resorted to her mother tongue; and Fonty surprised us by striking back in a Romance tongue. It did not sound to us like ‘pathetic rear-echelon French’” (385). In response, the archivists also abandon German, speaking “in our obligatory Russian . . . Pushkin . . . Turgenev . . . Chekhov . . . Mayakovsky.” Other literary languages follow, the Polish of Tadeus Rózewicz, the Mandarin of Mao, the Latin of Ovid and Horace: “Eventually we managed to bury the debate over unity and national identity in a welter of languages. Soon everyone was laughing, including eventually the grandfather and granddaughter, now reverting to German” (ibid.).

This eruption of polyglossia¹⁰ and Bakhtinian laughter demonstrates literary language’s ability to escape, however fleetingly, the logic of ideology. Yet the paradox of literary language is that it achieves freedom at the point of its own defeat: as it disintegrates into—albeit joyful—incomprehensibility. At that point, to continue, it has to be brought back to a meaningful norm; here the national language, German, enters into a necessary collaboration with ideology as *common* sense.

Collaboration

Thus, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Fonty and Hoftaller need one another; but where Cervantes’s characters represent the opposition of the literary imagination and material reality, in this, their latest incarnation, they represent the relationship between an expansive, dialogic German-European literary culture and the state. Whereas a certain liberal view of culture would see these two aspects in opposition, Bakhtin’s theory of the novel suggests that they are not easily separated. The centrifugal tendencies of heteroglossia—the capacity for meanings to extend and multiply, which Bakhtin sees as the essence of the novel form (Bakhtin 260–75)—are in a dialectical relationship with the centripetal organizing principle of narrative, which is necessary for it to make sense. As Ken Hirschkop explains: “To represent heteroglossia, one must . . . have narrative, and to have narrative: one must represent heteroglossia” (228). If Fonty stands for the possibility of heteroglossia, Hoftaller gives it shape—although they sometimes reverse positions so that it is Tallhover/Hoftaller who provokes multiple meanings and Fonty who acts as policeman. Thus the relationship between Fonty and Hoftaller is one of literary form as well as politics: Hoftaller is the political limit to Fonty’s heteroglossia, but he is also what stops Fonty’s endless productivity from becoming meaninglessness;

¹⁰ *Polyglossia*, in Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, refers to the plurality of national languages, as opposed to *heteroglossia*, which refers to the socially stratified dialects of a single national language (see Shepherd).

1 Fonty gives Hoftaller's "modest narrative" a heteroglot grammar that opens up the
2 future.¹¹

3 Not surprisingly then, *collaboration* is a key term. Fonty is the representative of
4 soft literary resistance, but he has also been an occasional, almost shockingly
5 casual, *Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter* (IM), one who unofficially "works with" the East
6 German security services. The archivists "surmise" that his reports to Hoftaller
7 about the East German literary scene, centered on the Prenzlauer Berg district, were
8 betrayals that were also designed to protect: "His reports—well-informed, to be
9 sure, and characteristically sardonic—and his witty thumbnail sketches of the
10 individuals in question . . . cut down to medium size these young geniuses who had
11 aroused the state's suspicions" (19); but if his "literary" reports as an IM opened up
12 a cultural space, they also confirmed its limits. In this respect, Fonty's paradoxical
13 situation is the paradox of literature itself, which makes claim to be a free linguistic
14 space that exceeds ideology yet is always dependent on ideology as common sense
15 for communicating meaning. One of the reasons the novel was labeled "unread-
16 able" is the sheer quantity of its allusions, which play on the boundary where
17 meaning in excess becomes nonmeaning.¹² If Fonty is the fount,¹³ the mouthpiece
18 of European culture, Hoftaller is limit, controlling Fonty's speech and his move-
19 ments, hardly leaving his side and when he does, able to produce documents that
20 track his every step. On one hand, Fonty's collaboration suggests that this was an
21 unavoidable part of the experience of living in the East German state, but the novel
22 also seems to show that the artist has no choice but to be a *Mitarbeiter* under any
23 system of government. Art is always shadowed by the state. It always collaborates
24 to a greater or lesser extent.

25 If Fonty's casual references to his role as an informer were enough in themselves
26 to make the novel controversial, the notion of collaboration is complicated by the
27 one episode in his life that now appears heroic. Just as the exact circumstances of
28 Fontane's capture as a German spy and later release from prison during the Franco-
29 Prussian War are shrouded in mystery, so Fonty's activities in wartime France con-
30 ceal a secret: he worked with the French resistance to make broadcasts on German
31 culture to the occupying troops. These broadcasts, like his postwar lectures for
32 the East German Cultural Union, were a kind of soft resistance, designed to subvert
33 the Nazi war effort by sapping morale rather than through outright opposition.
34 Whereas collaboration in the GDR now looks like complicity, his anti-Nazi activities
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11 *If one aims for modest heroes, whose problems can be framed and resolved within the bounds of a stable, existing lifeworld (a "single language"), one ends up with a modest narrative and, so far as Bakhtin is concerned, a modest narrative is no more than the counterfeit of a true one. For the point is to narrate, as Bakhtin said of Flaubert, "not changes within the limits of a given life (progress, decline) but the possibility of a life different in principle, with different scales and dimensions." Only when the grammar of the world is heteroglot can we be sure that history, "a time maximally focused on the future" will leave no stone unturned or unturnable. (Hirschkop 228–29)*

12 Even Grass's friend, the East German novelist Wolf, thought that the novel's allusiveness constituted an impediment to the ordinary reader. See "Letter" 469.

13 The pun is valid, as Fontane's Huguenot name derives from the French *la fontaine*, meaning fountain or source.

appear commendable, but the consequences of his act are not without their own moral ambiguity. Fonty escaped discovery, but his pregnant French lover was persecuted as a collaborator in liberated France. Hoftaller, who has a discomfiting access to all aspects of Fonty's past, arranges for his recognition by France as a hero of the resistance, but he also uses his knowledge of the affair and illegitimate child to blackmail Fonty and extend his control over his actions.

Fonty's association with one of Communism's moments of heroism, its record of antifascism, complicates a triumphalist postunification narrative that would see the Communist tradition as at best outmoded and at worst pure evil. However, the novel suggests that any act of collaboration is difficult to judge. Working with even a good "enemy" has unpredictable consequences, and its meaning can alter. Treason may come to be seen as heroism, loyalty to the state may be reinterpreted as betrayal, and personal bravery can also mean personal infidelity. Each act is caught in a discursive web, but the web and therefore the meaning of the act alter over time. In the novel, the truth is a wide field that cannot be disassociated from the many fictions through which it is represented. Not surprisingly, then, one of the key concerns of *Ein weites Feld* is the boundary, not just between meaning and nonmeaning but between reality and fiction; the novelistic problem of Bovaryism, to which Rancière has recently returned in his essay on Gustave Flaubert's novel in *The Politics of Literature*.

Bovaryism and Betrayed Time

For Rancière, Emma Bovary's "crime" is not moral but aesthetic: not adultery, *per se*, but her refusal to distinguish between two different "sorts of enjoyment." In his essay on *Madame Bovary*, he begins with the question, "Why was it necessary to kill Emma Bovary?" His answer is that she "doesn't mistake literature for life. She positively demands a life and a literature that can merge into a single reality. What defines her character is her refusal to distinguish between . . . the material enjoyment of material goods and pleasures, and the spiritual enjoyment of literature, art and lofty ideals" (Rancière, *Politique de la littérature* 59; my translation).¹⁴ "Emma's mistake, her sin against art" is to assume the artist's privilege of seeing the possibility of "the aestheticization of daily life." (*Politics of Literature* 57). However, for Rancière, this is not just a question of aesthetics but of politics. The question of who is allowed to decide what is enjoyable is a democratic one. Flaubert, the advocate of "pure literature" (67), kills Emma because she makes visible a more democratic aesthetic, one more available to a "common world": "Literary equality is certainly independent of all democratic politics. But it is, on the other hand, integral to this distribution of the perceptible that cancels the difference between two kinds of humanity, between beings destined for great deeds and refined passions and beings doomed to the practical and positive life" (55).

It is instructive to compare Emma's "mistake" with the accusations against Grass. His "crime," like Emma's, is characterized as "against literature" (59); but whereas Flaubert has to put Emma to death "to preserve art from its malevolent

¹⁴ For a slightly different translation see *Politics of Literature* 51.

1 double, the aestheticization of life" (ibid.), *Ein weites Feld* renders aesthetic the
 2 everyday life of the GDR (Jameson), all traces of which the new Germany wanted to
 3 eliminate. Instead, in Grass's novel, the GDR lives on in Fonty, who refuses to die.
 4 He, like Fontane, is the Immortal. His literary pleasure in reviving, replaying, and
 5 bringing into juxtaposition every aspect of the long history of Germany, warts and
 6 all, threatens to perpetuate not just the memory of the GDR but all aspects of the last
 7 two hundred years that the new Europe would like to forget. In Rancière's terms,
 8 the novel redistributes the perceptible in a way that "cancels the difference
 9 between" East and West, the old and new Germanies, making those differences
 10 subject to reinterpretation and dispute.

11 Fonty appears to confuse not just Fontane's novels but also Fontane's life with his
 12 own. Yet it gradually becomes clear that this literary joke allows him to reclaim
 13 moments of history that might otherwise be lost. Indeed, his Bovaryism makes
 14 visible not just what was but also what might have been. In book 1, Fonty is asked
 15 the time by a young Turkish woman, who mistakes the verb *raten* (to advise) for
 16 *verraten* (to betray):

17
 18 "Would you be so kind as to betray to us what time it is . . ."

19 Fonty . . . betrayed it to the girls, who thanked him with a nice little bob, turned,
 20 and went on their way, After a few steps they broke into a run, as fast as if they had to
 21 get the betrayed time to safety as quickly as possible. (98)

22
 23 Bovaryism in *Ein weites Feld* allows "betrayed time"—that time which, but for its
 24 preservation in the aesthetic, might otherwise be lost—to refind its expression.
 25 Fonty, like Don Quixote and Emma Bovary (not to mention the numerous other
 26 novels, such as *Northanger Abbey* and *Lord Jim*, whose main characters are subject to
 27 Bovaryism), lives partly in a fictional world and partly in a realist-historical time
 28 and space; but Fonty's fantasy differs from those of Emma and Don Quixote
 29 because he has constructed an extended life out of Fontane's fictional and nonfic-
 30 tion writings, including, it is suggested, some documents not available to the
 31 archive (170). He is, however, like his two famous predecessors, subject to flights of
 32 fancy and the desire to escape from the ordinary.

33 When at the end of book 1 the opportunity arrives to get a new passport and to
 34 convert his savings into Deutschmarks, he attempts to flee to Scotland, for which—
 35 like Emma Bovary, Fontane, and most nineteenth-century European readers of the
 36 novel—he shares a romantic enthusiasm derived from Walter Scott. He catches a
 37 train with the intention of taking the ferry from Hamburg but is rudely prevented:

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 39 *The train pulled out, and was just picking up speed when the compartment door flew*
 40 *open. Panting and dripping with sweat, the new passenger wrestled his suitcase onto*
 41 *the overhead luggage rack and threw himself down on the seat next to Fonty. "Whew!*
 42 *Just made it!" he exclaimed by way of a greeting. "Train was already moving; had to*
 43 *jump on."*

44 *He whipped the American cap off his head and with his hand mopped his damp*
 45 *brow and his sweat-matted spike of hair. Fonty did not even have to open his eyes.*
 46 *Whatever came now, he would obey blindly. (137–38)*

The late arrival is Hoftaller, already wearing a parody of American dress, who persuades Fonty to get off at the next station, Bahnhof Zoo, so that he is forced to remain within the city.

The encounter is a moment when literary fantasy, mediated through multiple texts, meets reality. Fonty's Quixotic expedition is prevented by Hoftaller, who plays a cynical and manipulative Sancho Panza. Like Lord Jim, Fonty is made to face up to the gap between his imagination of himself as a hero in a novel and his personal cowardice. As with Emma Bovary, his dream goes sour. These multiple literary valences meet the power of the state as historical force. Although the archivists "doubt the alleged nonviolence of what ensued" (138), the coercion comes from Hoftaller's knowledge of Fonty's compromises in the GDR rather than physical force. As Hoftaller waits for Fonty to yield, he reads him "something from the culture pages" of the newspaper about the East German literary scene and "suspected informants" (139). At a time when disputed evidence about collaboration with the state by East German writers was coming to light, Hoftaller still appears to be controlling the literary. However, the disturbing nature of the encounter does not just stem from the parallels with the East German state. Hoftaller's new power lies in his ability to use his knowledge to disgrace Fonty in the eyes of the new united Germany, which Hoftaller now serves and in whose interests it is to devalue the literary culture of the GDR.

The paradox of Fonty's defeat is that, in laying bare the complicity of literature with the state, Grass himself refuses unconditional fealty to the new state. The writer's proper loyalty, he seems to suggest, should be to all our pasts, with all their failures, embarrassments, and delusions (Broadbent 146). To do otherwise would be to mythologize the origins of the new state, to refuse history, and perhaps more importantly to refuse fantasy, Bovaryism, the dreams of each age, which can be revealing even when they came to nothing. Fonty's failure to escape, which brings book 1 to an end, is an example of just such a lost or "betrayed" moment in time, that which Slavoj Žižek calls the future anterior: "[T]he future one should be faithful to is *the future of the past itself*, in other words, the emancipatory potential that was not realized due to the failure of past attempts and for that reason continues to haunt us" (Žižek 394). In the still-surviving figure of Fonty, that potential is not yet lost to the future. He suffers a nervous collapse as a consequence of his failed escape, but he is brought back to health through writing. Fonty, like Grass, writes himself back into the dialogic relationship between literature and life.

Because the dividing line between Fonty and Hoftaller is not absolute, Hoftaller too is subject to Bovaryism. Not only does he refer to Schädlich's novel as his "biography," his wilder assertions about the power of the Stasi—that reunification is part of a cunning plan to bring down the West, which will collapse under the weight of the economic burden of the East—themselves move from harsh cynicism to the realms of conspiratorial fantasy. Hoftaller's survival, no less than Fonty's, impedes a history that falls into neat ideological categories. Their dialogic relationship draws attention to the dangers of founding the new Germany on the myth of its origins in which much remains buried and forgotten. The novel's insistence on dialogism and heteroglossia resists a closing-down of the past, thus creating the

1 conditions for a more open and inclusive future—Rancière’s common world—
 2 where inclusivity means an openness to dispute and democratic debate.

4 Die Treuhand/*Jenny Treibel*

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 6 By the final part of the novel, the future is governed less and less by Hoftaller—who
 7 gradually metamorphoses into a comic figure—and more and more by the new
 8 tenant of the Ministries Building, the Treuhand. The “Handover Trust” is tasked
 9 with winding down (*abwickeln*) the East German economy and parceling it up for
 10 privatization. Against this new and powerful organizer of meaning, Grass pits a
 11 new literary intertext: Fontane’s late novel *Jenny Treibel* (1892).

12 The eponymous Frau Jenny Treibel is an arriviste member of the new Berlin
 13 middle class, one of those who has benefited most from the prosperity that followed
 14 the first unification. In order to secure the family’s position, she prevents her son
 15 from marrying his true love, Corinna, the daughter of a professor of limited means;
 16 but this is no tragic romance: the uninspiring son, Leopold, gives in easily to an
 17 arranged marriage with Hildegard, the sister of his brother’s wife, daughters of rich
 18 Hamburg merchants. The spirited Corinna marries her academic cousin instead, and
 19 the reader feels that she has got the better deal. From Fonty’s point of view, the novel
 20 shows that mercantile marriage is inferior to the literary household. Enforced uni-
 21 fication on economic grounds is destined for unhappiness. Less wealth and a richer
 22 culture is the better union. This lesson propels Fonty into new excesses.

23 In comparison with Fontane’s economic plot, the final two books of *Ein weites Feld*
 24 are, as Fredric Jameson commented in an early review, “episodic” and perhaps
 25 “something of an indulgence on Grass’s part.” Hoftaller allows Fonty a new, if still
 26 supervised, freedom. Another attempt to escape the country by plane is foiled, but
 27 their walks around Berlin are replaced with trips across the territory of the old East
 28 Germany. They travel in Hoftaller’s Trabi to its industrial wastelands, the border with
 29 Poland, and the monument to Fontane in his (and Fonty’s) hometown, Neuruppin.

30 Fonty is engaged to write a history of the Ministries Building, from its con-
 31 struction as Goering’s aviation ministry to its emergence as the headquarters of the
 32 Treuhand. Inevitably, his text exceeds its immediate topic and excels in fantastic
 33 historical juxtapositions, in which the building’s paternoster lift acts as a metaphor
 34 for the rise and fall of the different German states (see Jameson). The novel culmi-
 35 nates in a public lecture given by Fonty in which all the novel’s historical themes are
 36 rehearsed. As a finale, he starts to link and “stoke up” the various fires that appear in
 37 Fontane’s plots, building up a conflagration that seems to leap out of the lecture hall:
 38 “[N]o wonder we assumed the sirens approaching outside were part of the lecture.
 39 People thought the Immortal had ordered the Berlin fire brigade to deploy en masse
 40 and participate in Fonty’s fiery performance. At that moment, someone outside tore
 41 open the emergency exit and shouted: ‘It had to happen. The Handover Trust’s
 42 burning!’” (639). In the end, however, the blaze is greater in Fonty’s imagination than
 43 in reality. Although the paternoster lift is destroyed, there is no serious damage to
 44 the Treuhand, which of course completed its work.¹⁵ In the confusion, Fonty finally

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 46 ¹⁵ In 2011 the Treuhand was even considered as a model for the restructuring of the Greek economy.

escapes from Hoftaller, an act that reverses their positions so that this time it is Hoftaller who suffers an (albeit short-lived) nervous collapse (642, 651).

The Risk of Interpretation

How are we meant to interpret Fonty's third, successful bid for freedom? Not too seriously, I would suggest. Hoftaller makes a rapid recovery and if anything seems refreshed and ready for a new challenge. Fonty's escape can be read as a literary gesture, necessary to end the narrative but provisional rather than final. As with the rest of the novel, the aim of its ending is to keep things in play. The novel's refusal of neat boundaries and easy meaning is both its strength and (for some critics) its weakness. It allows Grass to make visible those aspects of Germany's history that have been buried and forgotten, in effect demanding a readership that has the potential to become the kind of post-Cold War community he wants to see: one that is conscious of the breadth and the depth of a German-European past. However, the complexity of the text that makes these demands involves risks. Even sympathetic critics, such as Wolf and Jameson, have been concerned that the novel's expansive and digressive form, its dense, intertextual web of allusion, might defeat the average reader.

Yet the average reader bought the book, recognizing, apparently, that experience of defeat is what the novel is about. With the exception of his final escape, Fonty's "literary" excursions always end in defeat. If the reader, too, is often defeated by the text, the compensation is an expanded view of the world, what Rancière calls a new "distribution of the perceptible" (4). The paradox of defeat, the novel suggests, is that failure gestures to a wider field of meaning, a space for dissent that becomes apparent only at the point where a narrow ideological view of the world is seen to have become inadequate. Only when this point is reached is it possible to imagine a post-Cold War community that can embrace and articulate history's lost causes as well as the victor's truth. The novel's use of Bovaryism is just one novelistic technique for the recovery of the lost cause and the rediscovery, in a Proustian sense, of lost or "betrayed time." In this way, the novel's brave engagement with the lost causes of the twentieth century summons up an alternative democratic community unbounded by the narrow discourses of victory.

The true test of Grass's novel will be whether the wide field it opened up will continue to offer fresh insights on 1989 as that moment recedes from memory. Almost two decades after its publication, the novel has had very little discussion beyond Germany. Yet its wide scope deserves a wide readership. For those who see the fall of the Berlin Wall as the epoch-making event of the last quarter of the twentieth century, *Ein weites Feld* should be promoted as a key text for our understanding of the beginning of the twenty-first and as an example of how the novel as a form may still have a role in bringing into existence Rancière's "common world."

* * *

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