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Wrong Side of the *Wende*

**The galloping Weltgeist**

Grass should have been left stranded by the historical changes of 1989–91, as – mercifully – he was proved so overwhelmingly wrong. Yet the very opposite proved to be the case. The next five and a half years turned into one of the busiest and most productive phases of his entire career. The reason was simple: he could now write once more on what had always really been his favourite theme: Germany and the Germans. Ideology was also back in fashion – the monetary ideology of the market place: as communism had been finally and utterly discredited, the economic values of the free market were set to reign unchallenged. The old sceptic could hardly let that pass without a fight; and fight he was determined to do.

The year before the fall of the Berlin Wall found Grass quite coincidentally on the German–German border in the Harz sketching stricken trees for *Dead Wood*: the threat to the German forests was a pan-German phenomenon. Like everyone else he followed the momentous events in Eastern Europe with amazement: from mid-summer 1989 they took a series of increasingly dramatic turns, each one more unexpected than the last. The first climax came in Peking on 4 June when the Chinese government massacred pro-democracy protestors on Tianamen Square, the same day as ice-breaking elections in Poland which resulted in a resounding vote for *Solidarność*, the independent trade-union movement born in the shipyards of Gdansk. This conjunction neatly and bloodily illustrates the dual character of this year of revolution, the mixture of threat and promise, fear and hope that spread across the Soviet bloc like a contagion. In August, the Hungarians relaxed border controls to allow GDR-citizens to walk into Austria, where they were greeted by none other than Otto von Habsburg, son and heir of the last Austro-Hungarian emperor. Hundreds more had taken refuge in the FRG embassy in Prague, demanding to be allowed to emigrate. In the GDR itself there followed the charade of the fortieth-anniversary celebrations of the state’s founding in October, the subsequent change in the leadership when Erich Honecker finally gave way to his crown prince, the deeply unpopular Egon Krenz. This in turn intensified the weekly protest marches in Leipzig and elsewhere, culminating in the biggest political demonstration in German history on the Alexanderplatz on 4 November. The writers Christa Wolf,
Christoph Hein, Stefan Heym and Heiner Müller all spoke to the crowd in favour of reforming socialism: ‘imagine we had socialism and no-one wanted to leave’ opined Wolf, paraphrasing a slogan from the 1980s West German peace movement. Theo Wuttke, alias Fonty, the hero of Too Far Afield who hates nothing more than crowds and ostentation, joins them, but his attempts to dampen down the euphoria are drowned out in the excitement.

The grassroots campaigns in the GDR wanted to realise the Prague dream of 1968 by creating ‘socialism with a human face’: freedom of expression and freedom to travel were among their prime objectives. There was initially no thought of throwing off communism, let alone of joining the Federal Republic or adopting free-market capitalism. Once ‘History’ started to happen in earnest on 9 November, however, when Günter Schabowski casually announced at the end of a press conference that travel between the two German states would no longer be restricted, everything changed at a stroke. Events, which had already been moving at an unprecedented pace, now went into overdrive: the demonstrators famously changed their slogan from Wir sind das Volk, meaning that they, the people, in whose name the GDR state had been founded, should at last have a say in how it was run, to Wir sind ein Volk, by which they meant the two Germanies should become a single political entity.

Many West German politicians and intellectuals were caught out by these developments. The younger generation in particular did not know how to react, leaving it to those with a distant memory of a united Vaterland. When Grass turns the events into fiction he picks out this age group once more. The main characters in Too Far Afield and The Call of the Toad are all roughly contemporary with Oskar, Pilenz, Amsel and Matern. Martin Walser, born the same year as Grass, who had written about the pain caused by German division during the 1980s and been bombarded with criticism, now seemed vindicated. He greeted the move to national unity. The Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the same age as the novelists, native of Halle in Sachsen-Anhalt, and tireless advocate of Ostpolitik through the 1970s and 1980s, knew instinctively what he wanted and helped Helmut Kohl, just three years younger, to seize the initiative which he never subsequently relinquished. Kohl, a history graduate with a PhD in postwar politics, spoke ceaselessly of historical opportunities, determined to seize ‘the coat of history’ as it swished past him, as Bismarck had done in 1870. What the Protestant Prussian had achieved through war, the Catholic Rhinelander would manage without spilling a drop of blood.

All this horrified Günter Grass. He did not like the way the original revolutionary movement had been hijacked by the nationalist unifiers, nor the way the West dictated the terms of reunification. Germany had existed as a single entity only once before, between 1871–1945, and the precedent, to put it mildly, was not auspicious. In December 1989 at the SPD’s annual conference in West Berlin he revived his old idea of ‘two confederate states’, this time, adapting Gorbachev’s proposal, occupying adjacent rooms ‘in the European House’ (XVI:227). What he feared was the prospect of national unification under terms decided by the nationalists, which appeared to mean a repeat of 1870 rather than a second attempt to make 1848 work.