Fonty/Fontane:
Neo-Victorian Simulation in *Too Far Afield* by Günter Grass

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Abstract:
The neo-Victorian angle allows access to Günter Grass's *Too Far Afield/Ein weites Feld* (1995), beyond its take on German reunification, as it encompasses the novel's individual form as well as its unique combination of genres in terms of historical fiction. This enquiry into structure evaluates a self-referential cluster of likeness as simulation. Everything hinges on 'Fonty' being a physical and intertextual double of Theodor Fontane. It becomes crucial to follow the performative course Grass sets up for his protagonist: encounters with monuments or other artistic images of the great nineteenth-century author. Acts of memory and their media lead up to a neo-Prussian state burial, which raises revisionist objections to contemporary displays of national continuity. References to British culture, the Victorian empire, and to literary revivals reinforce that reading. Moreover, the main non-Anglocentric context helps adjust the framework of neo-Victorianism to intercultural variations.

Keywords: Roland Barthes, contemporary German literature, cultural semiotics, Günter Grass, historical novel, historiographic metafiction, memory culture, simulation, *Too Far Afield*, transcultural neo-Victorianism.

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When Günter Grass centred his epic tale of Germany at the exceptional historic moment of 1990 reunification around the nineteenth-century author Theodor Fontane (1819-1898), his choice left critics baffled. Early responses to the novel are tellingly close to a less than favourable view of the Victorian revival in contemporary fiction: a big-scale exercise in nostalgia and a text depending on earlier creative efforts.[1] Although *Too Far Afield/Ein weites Feld* (1995) has been recognised and widely researched, an understanding through the lens of neo-Victorianism changes our perspective on this major work, but also on the possibilities of extending the neo-Victorian concept beyond Anglocentric settings and contexts. At first glance, the case of German reunification and various historical backgrounds from the 1830s onwards fall well outside the British Empire, Anglophone culture, or even

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postcolonial scenarios. This serves as a starting point to re-examine the transnational, intercultural reach of neo-Victorian criticism.

The labels available seem either too general or too specific to include the way Grass has arranged unrelated periods of Germany's past. Considering post- or neo-imperial affiliations, namely a contested "memory of empire" (see Ho 2012), the chronology of *Too Far Afield* covers the aftermath or lead-up to a unified nation and political expansion twice: in 1990 after the Fall of the Berlin Wall and in 1871 under the Prussian rule of Otto von Bismarck and Emperor Wilhelm I. Yet, in doing so, the text challenges any notion of a uniform heritage, which experts have deemed a risk of the global turn in neo-Victorian studies (see Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013: 26). The novel offers disruptive counter-memories through Eastern German voices like that of the main character. Plot and dialogue also tend to highlight recurring moments of turn-around and upheaval. Since Fontane was involved in pre- and post-revolutionary mentalities and institutions, he becomes a perfect mould for the GDR-witness and veteran, Theo Wuttke alias 'Fonty'.

Despite these memorial commitments, they do not fully account for the overall fictional strategy: Grass lends presence to a literary icon in the belated figure of Fonty in order to contest the official and largely glorified version of recent events that would soon be subject to commemoration. Paradoxically, the attempt to make the present look unfamiliar by creating contact with a further removed timeline relies on a strong likeness of appearance between Wuttke and his famed predecessor. Their uncanny resemblance, however, also prompts a more critical comparison due to its repeated thorough investigation in the text. The immortalised hero acts as a device that conjures a kind of spiritual unity within the archival narrative, which does not exist historically speaking. Such a spirit of the age(s) must present itself as fictional, and with that reservation in mind, Fonty shall be proclaimed the quasi Queen Victoria of German history – or rather, the reigning presence of what we are told about the latter by Grass.

This may sound like an overstatement, but it pertains to an important theoretical argument. 'Victoria', at least in relation to the 'Victorian Age', becomes a mythical token: it privileges continuity and a stable image (however misleading) of British culture. Research in the field, of course, has to question or measure that "unification factor" (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2010: 3), while neo-Victorian fiction takes its own opportunity to diversify the profile, undermining an illusion of a monolithic historical 'British'

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identity, for instance through explorations of nineteenth-century class, ethnic, and sexual minorities and countercultures. Any medium can potentially address that superficial sameness, that long duration itself: this elucidates the figure of likeness in Fonty/Fontane, which arguably reflects the basic process of mythical signification. In terms of Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957), neo-Victorian forms equal a "*second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second" (Barthes 1991: 113, original emphasis). Thus, the Fontane-complex informs the Fonty-narrative, which in turn interprets contemporary history in controversial ways, in effect as a "*second-order*" system of memorial signifiers. Such a shifting semiotic chain makes the mythology at work aesthetically transparent.

Based on those principles, 'simulation' introduces another possible master trope of neo-Victorian representational practice, comparable to 'spectrality' and 'mirroring'. The following sections – 'Doubling Fontane' and 'Re-enacting the Monument' – further demonstrate the premise that simulations are always performative if they provide a "critical interface" (Kohlke 2008: 1) for managing historical relations. The third section of the article adds the specific context of the 'Prussian Revival' in *Too Far Afield*, which evinces closer parallels to 'original' neo-Victorianism: the Prussian Revival – a ceremony for the remains of two great Prussian kings taking place in Potsdam in the wake of reunification – presents readers with a series of simulative performances that raise, mimic, and simultaneously oppose all the neo-imperial implications of a state burial. As the conclusion reveals, varied textual evidence suggests that the nineteenth-century British Empire, as much as Germany's history of the period, has directly inspired Grass's negotiation of German national issues and their myths.

This article supports the search for "'other neo-Victorians'" (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 2) and the expansion of neo-Victorianism's concerns to more global contexts. Examples from anywhere outside the English-speaking world require a proper theoretical justification if contexts like postcolonialism are not immediately relevant. Primarily, the semiotic mode, aesthetic techniques and media effects of what I have tried to describe as second-order historical mythologies provide that groundwork. Secondly, contextual displacement, typically across centuries but also involving any significant move in time or staging, recontextualises an already prominent and unified image of the past. 'Image' would comprise an "associative total"

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(Barthes 1991: 113) of fixed or currently solidifying meaning and a culturally recognisable set of signifiers. This general model, if it is not too universal, remains open for a range of cross-cultural transfers.

A first practical test for those claims comes early in *Too Far Afield*. "Approximately Scottish" ["Annähernd schottisch"][2] – the title of the second chapter – encapsulates the novel's multiple British connections,[3] including its update of a Victorian genre. The episode culminates in a feat of performance: Wuttke's rendition of Fontanes's ballad *Archibald Douglas* (1854) takes place at a McDonald's, not the "English House" in Berlin (Grass 2000: 17), where the Prussian writer originally held his birthday dinner. This displacement clearly indicates that, due to contemporary and commonplace surroundings, the same poem will resonate differently. Initially, Fonty evokes the memory of the MacDonald clan, using a random similarity of signifiers to launch into one of his historical lectures. On another level, ballads and clansmen might be generic code for the historical novel after Sir Walter Scott, which was about as popular during the nineteenth century as the fast-food chain is in the late twentieth. The qualifier "[a]pproximately" takes on a programmatic message as well: when performing the past for the present, presentations appear 'proximate' or similar, yet are never alike, because not only have times changed but so too the conditions of staging history.

1.   A Spitting Image Out of Time: Doubling Fontane

The third chapter, "From Liebermann's Hand" ["Wie von Liebermanns Hand"], depicts and assesses the way Wuttke looks like Fonty, introducing the trope of the double. The title alone already affords certain insights as it combines the likening particle with both aesthetic technique and the artist, Max Liebermann (1847-1935), who once produced a famous drawing of Fontane. The person, not the portrait, has the members of the Fontane Archive in Potsdam, who act as the anonymous collective narrator in *Too Far Afield*, wondering if the deceased is still around.

> Indeed, the resemblance was so close that you would have thought:[4] It's him; for if immortality – or, put another way, the survival of an idea after its embodiment's death – can be said to have a describable appearance, his features, whether in profile or frontal view, certainly reproduced those of the Immortal. (Grass 2000: 34)

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Evident identity – "It's him" and "so close" – noticeably comes with a rather complicated syntax and several conditions, although the conjunctive mode only enters as an afterthought, that is in the gesture prompted by Wuttke's old-fashioned, out-dated figure. Still, the archival reflections on immortality as a lingering idea do not diminish the immediate effect. The man called Fonty transcends a simple impersonation, because he is able to present exactly as Fontane. Discreetly, the verb 'reproduce' hints at some sort of depiction or at artistic representation in general.

Both essential factors to simulation, media performance and historical location, promptly come to the fore in the following remarks on Wuttke's almost perfect *doppelgänger* qualities:

> Several staff members from the Archives who had known Fonty since the fifties still insist that every time he appeared it was in a new edition.[5] But not until that year when the Wall fell and he had entered everyone's field of vision as a speaker on Alexanderplatz did he begin to resemble the well-known 1896 lithograph by Max Liebermann. (Grass 2000: 34)

Historical dates make a fundamental difference. Only at the time when the Berlin Wall falls and Wuttke becomes involved in the political actions of the late-stage GDR, does his resemblance with Fontane really emerge, notwithstanding earlier testimonies. Consequently, the dual constellation at the core of Grass's novel is always specific to history, whereas the literal translation of "jederzeit" as 'anytime' rather than "every time" would seem to signal temporal indifference. The expression for "resemble" ["näherte sich"] conveys a growing degree of similarity through physical (as well as temporal) proximity. At the same time, it confirms approximation as the only way to represent what is long gone and no longer physically present. Unlike Grass, Liebermann was a contemporary of Fontane, and therefore in the position to draw the writer first-hand.[6]

The hero of *Too Far Afield* is marked as a "second degree" character (Letissier 2015: 12): someone who emulates Fontane, someone who speaks in quotations from literary sources. Two significant neo-Victorian modes apply here: "transvoicing (ventriloquy)" and "transcoding (ideological redefinition)" (Letissier 2015: 2). Moving between media, visual cues in Grass's novel are soon overlaid with textual references when Thomas Mann

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comments on the iconic print made from Liebermann's drawing. In 1910, Mann harks back to the previous portrait while adding his afterimage of a revered literary ancestor in the name of serenity ["Heiterkeit"] (Grass 2012: 45). The unmentioned title of Mann's essay captures the phenomenon: 'Old Fontane' ['Der alte Fontane']. Despite a few flashbacks within the novel, the elderly incarnation of the late writer bears the most fascination and develops a cult potential supported by the narrative. Fonty is reliving the nineteenth-century life of the famous author, and *Too Far Afield* creates its 'historical' effects by incorporating extensive biographical material. That outline corresponds to a dominant subgenre of neo-Victorian writing designated as "celebrity biofiction" (Kohlke 2013: 4).[7]

Apart from his fans in the Potsdam archive, who regard him as a patron saint of their services to Fontane's memory, Wuttke has also won some disciples among the literary scene of the Prenzlauer Berg locality in Berlin. They feel decidedly charmed by his old-age persona: "the young poets never made fun of the old gentleman as eccentric old Theo Wuttke but esteemed him as Fonty" (Grass 2000: 18).[8] This sympathy across the age gap and generational boundaries suggests the whole approach Grass is taking when he tries to give his protagonist a contemporary appeal without concealing the fact that he remains a visitor from a different century. The author thus avoids both extremes in the reception of German 'Victoriana'. "In part they placed him on a pedestal; in part they reduced him to a mascot" (Grass 2000: 18).[9] Correspondingly, in using the Fontane-persona of Fonty for the purposes of writing his novel, Grass himself needs to navigate between retro-kitsch, monumentalising, and poetic transfiguration.

Old Fonty/Fontane thus becomes an emblem of the novel's neo-Victorian aesthetics. What this entails will further reveal itself through the highest degrees of likeness showcased by later scenes, discussed below. In the process, another British – or, more accurately, Scottish – prop becomes part of the double act.

> As a model and surviving image, [Wuttke] wore the scarf that [Julius] Rodenberg perceived as 'historic' and that the literary historian [Franz] Servaes describes in the year of the Immortal's death as if it were a sacred relic. (Grass 2000: 39)[10]

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Strangely, Grass uses the English spelling of 'scarf', i.e. "[s]hawl". Fonty
wears his piece of tartan cloth, a "blue-green Scottish scarf" ["blaugrünen
schottischen Shawl"], as the "flowing emblem of Celtic clan tradition"
["langwüchsiges Abzeichen keltischen Clanwesens"] transposed to and
performed in twentieth-century Berlin (Grass 2000: 39).

The newly coined modifier "langwüchsig[ ]", the quality of growing
long or over a longer period of time, lends itself as an apt metaphor for the
long-term memory of *Too Far Afield*. The Walter-Scott-subtext intensifies,
especially for a literary scholar knowing the historical genre going back all
the way to *Waverly* (1814). The latter's basic plot – following the subtitle
"'Tis Sixty Years Since" (Scott 1911) – relates the battles around national
identity between old highland tribes and English hegemony. Using a
referential encryption, Grass plays on the 'Scott-ish' past of the historical
novel. Yet the passage also promotes historical consciousness by making the
point that any perception of something as 'historical' is always located in (and
inflected by) the time of the perception.[11] The same goes for cult-like practises
of preserving the past. By extension, self-conscious reliance on relics from
the nineteenth century gains meta-fictional impact.

Later in the novel, Fonty reaches the height of almost complete
transfiguration, of becoming one with the historical Other. Twice within the
story, he plans to visit England and Scotland, as Fontane did in his day, until
Ludwig Hoftaller, the secret agent shadowing Wuttke, finds a way to thwart
each attempt. Immediately before another failed escape to Great Britain, our
hero plays his part with neither irony nor effort, "being the immortal, without
so much as a wink", the consummate simulation:

> During the last few weeks he had made a leap in age. He had
> gained a number of years, and now appeared as the fragile old
> man whom Liebermann's drawing captures for us: with alert
> eyes but watery gaze – already not altogether of this world.
> (Grass 2000: 562)[12]

Phrasing the aging process this way conflates the sudden "leap in age" with
an artistic accomplishment, something requiring skill. Fonty makes a stage-
like appearance while truly becoming immortal. *Too Far Afield* is committed
to maintaining that tension between actual realisation and simulated
performance. The novel also makes sure to include the media recording

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history and passing on certain images of the past. Liebermann's artwork has become the standard likeness for the elderly Fontane. The juxtaposed vivid impression and its 'otherworldly' overtones are part and parcel of the novel's typically neo-Victorian imagery, what Cora Kaplan, with reference to the "[t]he Victorian" in the present day, calls "at once ghostly and tangible, an origin and an anachronism" (Kaplan 2007: 5). Even without Victorian references, that double bind between reviving the past and generating an insubstantial and historically displaced afterimage comes to the surface.

In typically neo-Victorian fashion, *Too Far Afield* observes and reflects on its own "representational mechanisms" (Carrol 2010: 173), favouring the very late Fontane and fictionally reanimating him in Wuttke's persona. Hence, the staff of the Fontane Archive, as the main agents of the novel's narration, declare that Fonty actually feels "more alive" to them than the filed original immortalised in Liebermann's portrait (Grass 2000: 374).[13] Their visitor may be merely "a sort of copy of a Liebermann drawing" (Grass 2000: 485),[14] yet by being 'authentic', he manages to revitalise their profession. When the impersonator leaves, the story told by the archivists, i.e. the novel itself, loses its animating spirit.

> It was as if whole piles of valuable papers were turning yellow
> in our hands, as if the life-giving, dust-stirring breath were
> absent, as if we had to invoke him to make him seem real
> again; as if duty called us, now that he was gone, to take up
> immediately the collective task of capturing on paper the story
> of our vanished friend. (Grass 2000: 645)[15]

The legacy of Wuttke's simulated identity, as it turns out, does not lie in the usual business of preserving nineteenth-century material. His most striking habit of accurately quoting the past to comment on contemporary issues will essentially produce *Too Far Afield*. As the historians from the archive venture into creative writing, their manifest literary output is going to become controversial, but, incidentally, also more relevant to the historic times they live in post 1989. Poised between spectral absence and current inspiration, Fonty signifies the neo-Victorian endeavour.[16]

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2.   Re-enacting the Monument
A whole series of chapters revisits the actual similarity of historical original
and present-day copy, using the concrete example of a Fontane-monument.
This real sitting bronze figure has its local as well as temporal coordinates in
the author's birthplace of Neuruppin, where Theo Wuttke was born exactly
one hundred years later. As a site where centuries meet, the town presents a
more appropriate venue than the Scottish revival at McDonald's.

Grass elaborates the solid memorial object, the big statue, to unfold
all the meta-fictional ramifications of his own narrative memory work. The
sculpture is a posthumous piece of the early twentieth century, finished by the
artist Max Wiese in 1907. Before we even line up Fonty for comparison, the
effigy moves further from authenticity: not images of Theodor Fontane, but
his son Theo acted as stand-in or as 'model' for the person portrayed for
posterity. The younger offspring bears some resemblance to his father but
lacks his impressive stature. It would likely compare to letting Princess
Victoria, Queen Victoria's eldest daughter, sit for a statue of the monarch.
Though Wuttke's companion is keen to put his superior candidate to the test,
Fonty begins to pose only reluctantly as a real-life replica of the "resting
rambler" of Neuruppin (Grass 2000: 488).[17] Sitting next to the statue on the
pedestal-like bench, Fonty is supposed to mirror the monument in detail.
Despite the obvious likeness, a greater difference in size or scale ruins the
effect of a convincing double appearance.

First, there is a metaleptic incident: someone recognisable as the
author Grass visits the statue. Both heroes are suddenly static: "Fonty sat as
if cast in bronze; and Hoftaller, too, stood there turned to stone" (Grass 2000:
496).[18] A rift has opened up between "fiction and reality" ["Fiktion und
Wirklichkeit"] (Grass 2000: 496). Nonetheless, the twentieth-century writer
is unintimidated by Fontane's greatness: next to the bronze, the eminent
Prussian figure leaves "plenty of room" ["viel Platz"] (Grass 2000: 496).
Grass lays claim to a gap that literary imagination would be able to fill.
Meanwhile, Fonty's identification with the monument has made him
disappear. Only the self-referential move of his author leaving the scene
grants him sufficient license. It takes considerable effort, however, to stop
clinging to the larger-than-life sculpted presence of the past: "Ordered several
times to hurry up and let go of the monument so he could climb down, he still
clung to the bronze" (Grass 2000: 497).[19] Our old man needs several attempts

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to emancipate himself from that tangible image of the predecessor he has chosen to merge with almost physically.

The monument-chapters reappraise the narrative's visual analogue. On the one hand, the text reminds us that a likeness such as Fonty's does not exist, yet is rather made by craftsmen in their respective artistic medium. The sculptor has worked on that similar profile Theo Wuttke now shares with Fontane's metal features: "First he had roughed it out in modelling clay, then stylized it in a plaster casting, and finally heightened it by chiseling the bronze casting" (Grass 2000: 497).[20] On the other hand, that product of exact remodelling has to assert its own contemporary relevance. For his speech from atop the monument, Fonty needs to change his position and leave his sitting posture next to 'Fontane'. This is literally re-enacted in a bit of physical comedy with the look-alike sliding off the bench, "no longer wanting to be stuck to the cold, damp folds of the bronze coat. He positioned himself in front of the cast image" (Grass 2000: 499).[21] Wuttke is neither face-to-face with his idol like an observer, nor does their very proximity diminish him by comparison. Instead, he effectively uses that monumental visualisation as a backdrop for literary improvisation in "free speech" ["freier Rede"] (Grass 2000: 499). The archive apparently expects nothing less than a critique of the novel's message and method or at least a clue to what *Too Far Afield* is all about as a piece of historical fiction.

Fonty's verbal act begins with something he has not written himself, borrowing from the immortal author once again. Fontane's paper "'The Writer's Position in Society'" [*Die gesellschaftliche Stellung der Schriftsteller*] (Grass 2000: 500) was published in 1891, but in the novel's present setting, the essay on the literary artist's lack of freedom or independence takes on parallels to the methods facilitating state influence over writers during the GDR-era, either by censorship or self-limitation. What starts out as quotation moves on to find its own cause and voice: "Fonty had hit his stride" ["Fonty hatte seinen Ton gefunden"] (Grass 2000: 502). Arguably, the tone is necessary to point out the power of the Stasi, the Eastern German secret police, their notorious national intelligence and surveillance agency. Without denying the importance of what Wuttke has to say, we learn how *Too Far Afield* enlists the works of Fontane to make its points about recent or current German history: reinterpreting, based on facts and fiction, what is happening now in the light of what happened before. In this instance, Grass plays out the drama or even the antics of appropriation: Hoftaller has

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to urge Wuttke to climb the statue, to take his rightful place beside it. Fonty's adapted and original contribution pays the price of near exhaustion. It stays indebted to Theodor Fontane, his texts and his times.

With the monument-sequence, *Too Far Afield* puts forward its most complete exploration of neo-Victorianism as adaptational cultural practice: both semiotically or intertextually and in the pursuit of historical meaning. Instead of the ghostly apparitions or subtle traces that have become more familiar as neo-Victorian phenomena (see Arias 2014: 111), one of the climaxes in Fonty's largely episodic storyline confronts a substantial object of memory culture. We can hope to explain that switch further by referring back to the Liebermann-complex as well as the successful recital of the historical ballad at McDonald's. Grass pays close attention to the contemporary context in which nineteenth-century art reappears. In addition, he prefers to probe particular artefacts in various forms of media. More often than not, beyond technical transparency and (re-)contextualisation, an element of performance is on display. The text denies this in such an obvious manner that it ends up drawing attention to the very fact it seems to occlude: "Nothing dramatic took place" and "No such scene was played out" ["Nichts Theatralisches geschah" and "Nichts wurde in Szene gesetzt"] (Grass 2000: 498). As witnessed by the reader, Wuttke goes through his phases of 'doing' the monument instead of merely visiting it or resting on his long established appearance as ideal *doppelgänger* of old Fontane.[22]

For the purposes of the current case, i.e. enacting the monument and reading that enactment, it is useful to unpack the key term 'appropriation'. This creative process of engaging with primary texts or artworks is defined as "a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (Sanders 2006: 26). Grass does not adapt one singular novel, but rather takes Fontane's whole oeuvre and biography to put the big changes in the wake of 1989 into a uniquely anachronistic perspective of continuity. Even if lacking the "generic shift"[23] of many adaptations (Sanders 2006: 26), this form of rewriting constitutes a different scale of historical fiction. It also exposes the measures taken to achieve such a juxtaposition of centuries: Fonty sitting next to the statue, scrupulously imitating that figure, epitomises the baseline of performing 'likeness', until this straightforward type of simulation is successively expanded into a series of appropriative conflicts and rhetorical stances.

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Meta-analysis thus provides the cornerstone for claiming *Too Far Afield* for transcultural neo-Victorianism. Everything told around the Fontane-statue conforms to a widely accepted theoretical point of view. Neo-Victorian fiction finds its mode in approaching the nineteenth century as a "series of metatextual and metahistorical conjunctions as they interact with the fields of exchange and adaptation between the Victorian and the contemporary" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4).

3.   Distancing the Prussian Revival

Another monument reminds present-day readers of the reunified country's imperial past. One of the national sights, the so-called "Victory Column" ["Siegessäule"] in Berlin (Grass 2000: 13), receives a post-heroic makeover. Taking a walk around the relief depictions of Prussian battles won, Hoftaller and Fonty point out numerous missile holes from two World Wars: a direct, material crossover from nineteenth-century Prussian imperial glory to Nazi Germany's belligerent dominance and downfall in the twentieth. Expanding on German history, there is a curious detail about the column's unveiling in 1873: "At the time, the figure of Borussia as Victoria stood on a pedestal on Königsplatz, known today as Platz der Republik" (Grass 2000: 14).[24] Every information is factual, just as the name of the goddess happens to match that of the British monarch. Furthermore, we can find a symbolic juxtaposition in the way that Borussia, mythic personification of Prussia, and the ancient victorious and imperial deity named like Queen Victoria are semiotically incorporated in the same monument.[25]

The statue could be read as a symptom of untapped neo-Victorian potential: Fonty repeatedly tries to travel to Great Britain, but personal entanglements with his (Eastern) German past hold him back. The need to escape coincides with a resurgence of national grandeur as an undercurrent to the shared joy of celebrating reunification. The new political era ushers in a reinvigorated, redirected sense of historical identity. 'Mortal Remains', the chapter about a memorial state ceremony, dives into that background.

Strictly speaking, the focus here is not the nineteenth century but rather two notable Prussian kings from the eighteenth century. The reburial of Friedrich Wilhelm I and his son Friedrich II, commonly called 'the Great', takes place in their former residency of Potsdam. Still, there are aspects connecting those pre-national regencies to the Wilhelmine empire: for one thing, the dynasty of Hohenzollern, for another, the military rigour that

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marked Prussian culture since the reign of Friedrich I. Reversely, the old kingdom was not burdened with the remembrance of the disastrous consequences of imperial politics following the 1914 and 1933 cataclysms. This runs through Fonty's and Hoftaller's critical commentary of the event. Wuttke quotes Friedrich II.: "Yes, yes, Berlin is becoming a Metropolis" (Grass 2000: 615) – to which Hoftaller responds with "'What's the point!' […] 'What are democracy and the ruling mass doing here?'" (Grass 2000: 616).[26] Former Stasi-official Hoftaller expresses indignation at the unfitting presence of democratic leadership at a military-royalist ritual.

Even the archive renounces its authorial abstinence to voice their disapproval at officially revalidating neo-Prussian delusions of greatness: "This televised vultures' feast was nothing for us to celebrate. There's nothing as superfluous and at the same time despicable as yet another 'Potsdam Day,' was our motto" (Grass 2000: 617).[27] They refer to a case of German megalomania excluded from the festivities: in 1933, Hitler used conservative ceremonial means to mask his autocratic takeover of the elected parliament, the Reichstag, which had just reassembled that day. Thus, there is an uneasy recollection of propaganda at the outset of fatal political dynamics. The Potsdam remake of 1990, however, is a relatively simple affair: "No grand tattoo, only a small ceremony, but with television, the chancellor, Hohenzollern princes … it'll take a while …" (Grass 2000: 611, original ellipses).[28] The choice of words is an epic self-announcement as the entire course of the novel tells us about the long history ["ziemlich lange Geschichte"] behind the contemporary staging.[29]

A neo-Victorian digression will circle back to the mortal or rather immortal remains in question. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher resorted to invoking Victorian values as something that deserved to be not only remembered but also adopted under her cabinet during the early 1980s. To paraphrase retrospectively, Thatcher's intent was to "stir up patriotic pride in Britain's past" (Hadley 2010: 9). Moreover, the values claimed were less historical than stereotypical and tailor-made to the current agenda, as they often are. We only get a refashioned, incomplete, and instrumental version of history. Recourse to a legendary iconic figurehead of nineteenth-century cultural identity will rarely announce its purpose in any overt manner. Mostly, recruiting the Victorian or Prussian model is a matter of activating the past through selective remembrance, of giving it public visibility in a specifically

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engaging form. Even though Chancellor Helmut Kohl does not resort to speechifying, the televised ceremony speaks for itself.

From the archivists' point of view, the double re-burial comes close to disinterring something that has already been put to rest: national pomp and circumstance. Their dig at broadcasting the event as a "vultures' feast" (Grass 2000: 617) makes that irony quite obvious. Inadvertently, the memorial act is forgetting something else, at least on this single occasion: the Nazi-era. The narrators counteract that bias by naming the estate where the Wannsee Conference took place, "now a museum of terror" ["jetzt Museum des Schreckens"] (Grass 2000: 613), formerly the Nazi headquarter for planning the Holocaust. Fonty pursues his own method in trying to lift the spell of Prussian splendour by alternative acts of commemoration, again mainly from the nineteenth century. Casting fellow writer Heinrich von Kleist as a dissident, whom the Nazi-regime probably would have executed, does not have to be historically accurate.[30] Rather, it devises a minor neo-Victorian intervention meant to balance out the one-sided historical fabrication.

The same revisionist impetus drives Fonty to elaborate the 'Katte-tragedy' ['Katte-Tragödie'], which is not an actual play but rather Fontane's retelling of a historical episode concerning Friedrich II and his father.[31] Young Friedrich attempted to escape his strict military upbringing by secretly moving to France with the help of his companion Hans Hermann von Katte. The king enforced the most severe punishment for this act of disobedience. Anecdote has it that Friedrich I made his son watch his best friend's execution, presumably to shape the prince into a future king fit for war.[32] In hindsight, that cruel incident turns into a sacrifice made by Katte, who heroically takes the blame, according to Fontane and, likewise, Fonty. Grass has assembled a whole chain of appropriative remembrance: from Prussian origins and a critical literary tribute before 1900 all the way to the latest urgency of minor victims turned tragic heroes.

A theatrical performance of Katte's tragic fate installs simulation as meta-historiography. As a sideshow to the parade, a group from Poland stages a pantomime on the streets of Potsdam. The lack of dialogue, props, or realistic costumes makes history look unfamiliar, creating some distance. Fittingly, Wuttke mentions Bertolt Brecht when he imagines the kind of play the material could become (see Grass 2000: 618). That link implies that the spectacle is supposed to teach the audience something, enabling their own historical judgement – akin to the function of 'edutainment' often ascribed to

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neo-Victorian texts (though Brecht's estrangement effect involves a more discomfiting, less pleasurable form of instruction). *Too Far Afield* strives to help that process along by adding the missing details, but also by giving those sweeping interpretations Fonty developed decades ago in his talk "'What Does Katte Mean to Us Today?'" ["Was sagt uns Katte heute?"] (Grass 2000: 409), which was provocative and topical enough to upset the Stasi. Now, he is eager to bring his essay up-to-date, before attending neo-Prussian shenanigans. Grass has ultimately written an epic volume of fiction posing the question: 'What does Fontane mean to us today?'[33]

4.   Conclusion: Semiotics and Genre

At first, *Too Far Afield* seemed "at odds with the dominant literary and political discourse of the first half of the 1990s" (Braun 2011: 46). Yet if one replaces German struggles of memory and identity[34] with an aesthetic code for rewriting the nineteenth century, the Fontane-novel by Grass fits into the recent global scheme of neo-Victorianism. Any reconfiguration of periods for the sake of contemporary concerns turns into drama, figuratively, as performance in a public forum. Literary monument and royal burial both insistently illustrate that theatrical capacity of memorial discourse, which combines the artistic medium with contextual politics. Outside of fiction, the idea of an exposed and highly charged memory culture has found ample proof in the book's post-publication scandal (see Negt and Hermes 1996). Practices of simulation are not just a playful semiotic mode but are embedded in conflicts that arise when the mythical unification of an era, however close or distant from now, translates into fictional displacements.

Designating *Too Far Afield* as a neo-Victorian novel rests as much on structural patterns as on a pastiche style: the characteristic Fontane-voice, rendered by a personal, intertextual substitute. Even the "dual plot structure" (Hadley 2010: 6) between Victorian and contemporary worlds could not be more consistent with the overall arrangement. The continuous duality thanks to Fonty/Wuttke in fact *defines* the novel's form and meaning. However seamlessly the two strands blend, at the same time, Grass's narrative is prepared, self-reflexively, to lay bare its scaffolding. In a sense, the narrative even becomes a meta-level joke,[35] when Hoftaller eventually reveals Theo Wuttke to be the illegitimate great-great-grandchild of Theodor Fontane. The genealogical line being unveiled here affords another way to make the

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overarching formula stand out: fictional/fictionalised ancestry carries one image of neo-Victorianism within art and culture.

Too Far Afield is not easily pinholed into a single genre. It should be precisely the text's neo-Victorian fabric and logic, however, that mediates between more traditional forms of the historical novel and historiographic metafiction. If an epic piece of writing depends as heavily on the main character to carry the burden of bringing the past to life and figuring out the meaning of not just one, but two centuries worth of history, the text will inevitably incur a debt to the protagonist as a representative tool. The average hero derived from Scott's *Waverly*, though not an agent of historic events, would be able to stand in for his period by being invested in its key discursive interests and travelling through its major social spheres (see Shaw 1983: 156).[36] Fonty is a distillation of that generic essence, almost to the point of parody: he participated in every war or tumultuous interim and played a minor role in major institutions, such as the GDR-"Cultural Union" ["Kulturbund"], the "Ministries Building" ["Haus der Ministerien"], and the "Handover Trust" ["Treuhand"]. Grass can afford this functional anachronism of storytelling as long as he mitigates it via his analysis of simulation.

The heritage of historical fiction requires a counterpoint, which is where the simulacra around Fonty unfold their full potential. 'Simulacrum' does not equal Baudrillard's theoretical term in this case (see Baudrillard 1994). *Too Far Afield* actually upholds the distinction between original and secondary copy on principle, because otherwise the protagonist would lose his privileged status of representation. As a premise, the novel rebuilds a pre-postmodern hierarchy of likeness, despite its highly complex execution of scenes that either confront us with the similar surface or re-enact a given resemblance. The reality of the referent remains grounded less in the fictional individual Theo Wuttke than in specific contexts and in intermedial crossings like drawing and text, or monument and speech. Glitches into the 'hyperreal' – simulacra taking over regardless of mimetic correlatives (see Baudrillard 1994: 6) – possibly occur whenever Fonty makes the archive members forget his intertextual matrix entirely and thus appears more real or supremely alive to them than the author he is styled after.

The idea to use Fontane as medium of the present came to Grass on his trip through India. At least, that is the authorial anecdote he tells in his literary journal *Show Your Tongue / Zunge zeigen* (1988). Yet there is another coincidence to discover. In those notes, the writer imagines Fontane suddenly

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just being there, appearing as a revenant, and talking to Grass and his wife about past experiences:

> But the old man – this time we see him with snow-white hair, shortly before his seventy-fifth birthday – dodges, calling Ute's attention to several rather incidental documents from the great Lucknow Mutiny of 1857. In 1857, he had been staying […] in London und Scotland […]. For a good while we hear him chatting and grumbling. (Grass 1989: 14-15)[37]

This is *Too Far Afield* in a nutshell; that imaginary meeting delivers the missing piece to Grass's big project. An earlier entry reads: "the Victoria Memorial Museum, a nightmare hewn in stone, the ultimate evidence of British colonial rule" (Grass 1989: 13).[38] The equivalent would be Fonty and Hoftaller visiting the Victory Column with its selective memory of Prussian triumphs. We can think of the monument and media encounters as an expansion of that nucleus. Still, there is one final fitting juxtaposition. The narrator of *Show Your Tongue* casually offers "a few quick comparisons between Kipling's relationship to the British Empire and Fontane's own love-hate for Prussia" (Grass 1989: 14).[39] That comparative method is quite similar to drawing historical parallels in the manner of *Too Far Afield*. Based on those configurations, the axis between Prussia and the Victorian Empire becomes integral to the entire epic structure. After all, the repeated co-presence of Victoria and Borussia symbolises the writing programme: a neo-Victorian novel starring the Prussian man of letters, set in reunification Germany, maps an enlarged territory corresponding to a wide historical landscape that itself becomes a quasi-monstrous work of fiction.

Notes

1.   Samantha J. Carrol discards "the pejorative accusations of nostalgia, fetishism and derivativeness" (Carrol 2010: 173) by giving due weight to the revisionist historiography the neo-Victorian strand of postmodernism has to offer. Grass casts his highly intertextual novel in the same vein.

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2. All quotations in the original German are taken from the 2012 edition of *Ein weites Feld*; for longer quotes, translations with separate references are included in endnotes.

3. The opening to this chapter contains references to mistletoe folklore, "an English custom, still alive in Wales as well, and all the way up to the Orkneys" (Grass 2000: 17) / "eine […] englische, doch gleichfalls in Wales und bis hoch zu den Orkney-Inseln lebendig gebliebene Tradition" (Grass 2012: 25). This goes along with the "English House Restaurant" and collective mentions of "old Prussia" (Grass 2000: 17).

4. Against common usage, Grass uses 'ähneln' like an intransitive verb, i.e. without required object, which places more importance on the active nature of 'looking like'. "So sehr ähnelte er, daß man vermuten konnte: er ist es; wenn Unsterblichkeit – oder anders gesagt, das ideelle Fortleben nach dem Tod – ein beschreibbares Aussehen hat, gaben seine Gesichtszüge im Profil wie frontal den Unsterblichen wieder" (Grass 2012: 44).

5. The German "Neuauflage" rather means 'as a reissue of Fontane's looks'. "Einige Mitarbeiter des Archivs, denen Fonty seit den fünfziger Jahren bekannt war, behaupten noch heute, er sei jederzeit als Neuauflage in Erscheinung getreten. Aber erst im Jahr, als die Mauer fiel, und seitdem er uns allen als Redner auf dem Alexanderplatz ins Blickfeld gerückt worden war, näherte sich sein Aussehen der bekannten Lithographie von Max Liebermann aus dem Jahr 1896" (Grass 2012: 44).

6. Nevertheless, there are stages to the final lithography dating from 1896. Because every significant item in this novel has to be paired, a second visual document is introduced, namely the "sketch by Blomberg, done in late Biedermeier style" (Grass 2000: 35).

7. The more general definition of neo-Victorian biofiction comprises all artistic "re-imaginings of the lives of actual individuals during the long nineteenth century, in which said individuals provide the sole or joint major textual foci and narrated/narrating subjects" (Kohlke 2013: 4). Kohlke's subcategory "celebrity biofiction" (Kohlke 2013: 4) aligns with the secondary popularity of Fonty.

8. "Und da die jungen Poeten den alten Herrn nie als schrulligen Theo Wuttke verlacht, sondern als Fonty hochgeschätzt haben" (Grass 2012: 27).

9. "Teils wurde er bis zur Erhabenheit verklärt, teils zum Maskottchen verniedlicht" (Grass 2012: 27).

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10. "Er trug als Modell und fortlebendes Abbild jenen Shawl, den Rodenberg als 'historisch' empfunden hat und den der Literaturhistoriker Servaes im Todesjahr des Unsterblichen wie eine Reliquie beschreibt" (Grass 2012: 49).

11. Kohlke notably includes "historical consciousness" among the multiple operations of the term 'neo-Victorian' "as term, as genre, as 'new' discipline, as cultural happening, as socio-political critique, as reinvigorated historical consciousness, as memory work, as critical interface between the present and past" (Kohlke 2008: 1).

12. The passage reads: "ganz ohne Zwinkern der Unsterbliche zu sein. Während der letzten Wochen war ihm ein Alterssprung gelungen. Er hatte etliche Jahre zugelegt und trat als jener fragile Greis auf, den uns der Zeichner Liebermann überliefert hat: ganz wachen Auges, aber – bei wäßrigem Blick – ein wenig jenseitig schon" (Grass 2012: 662).

13. "Er war uns lebendiger als das in Karteikästen gezwängte Original" (Grass 2012: 444).

14. The phrase reads: "als Abklatsch einer Liebermann-Zeichnung" (Grass 2012: 574); "Abklatsch" implies an exact copy that is less original and therefore less artistically valuable.

15. "Es war, als gilbten unter unseren Fingern ganze Stöße kostbarer Papiere, als mangelte uns sein belebender, staubaufwirbelnder Atem, als müβten wir ihn beschwören, damit er uns wieder leibhaftig werde, es war, als mahne uns, kaum war er weg, die Pflicht an, sogleich und als Kollektiv die Geschichte des Verschollenen niederzuschreiben" (Grass 2012: 759).

16. For the familiar metaphorical complex of spectrality or "the sense of the ghostliness of the Victorian past", see Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 147. Spectrality is less prominent in the lines just quoted or in the novel as a whole, except for the thought of 'conjuring' the spirit of Fontane's double.

17. Calling the bronze "the resting rambler" ["der rastende Wanderer"] (Grass 2012: 577) carries an allusion to Fontane's popular prose series *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg* (1862-89) and nods to the virtual arrest in time that the historical representation achieves in a durable, immovable art form.

18. "Fonty saß wie in Erz gegossen; auch Hoftaller stand samt Zigarre versteinert" (Grass 2012: 586).

19. "Mehrmals dazu aufgefordert, nun endlich vom Denkmal zu lassen und treppab zu steigen, klebte er dennoch an der Bronze" (Grass 2012: 588).

20. The quote reads: "eine gewisse Ähnlichkeit […] zuerst in Modellierton anzulegen, dann im Gipsguß zu stilisieren und schließlich durch Ziselierarbeit am Bronzeguß zu steigern" (Grass 2012: 587).

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21. The quote reads: "wollte nicht mehr auf dem kalten, feucht beschlagenen Faltenwurf der Bronze kleben. Er stellte sich vor den bekrittelten Abguß" (Grass 2012: 590).

22. Reviewers and some critics (see Brockmann 2009: 136) like to use the gothic term "revenant" ["Wiedergänger"] (Grass 2000: 347) for late Fontane walking Berlin a whole century after his demise. In his conclusion about genre typical features of characterisation, Letissier attributes spectrality to the fictional subject's communicating in-between temporal planes: "The neo-Victorian neo-character suggests an uncanny impression of *déjà vu* while embodying and articulating current topical issues" (Letissier 2015: 15). This almost reads like an exact formula of the entire Fonty-project.

23. Remediation does not take place with the novel itself, but with the Fontane-figures as simulating substitutes: in visual art like lithography or photography, sculpture, rhetoric or dramatic performances etc.

24. "Damals stand die erhöhte Borussia als Viktoria auf dem Königsplatz, dem heutigen Platz der Republik" (Grass 2012: 21).

25. "Shortly before the beginning of the Second World War she was moved, on orders from on high, from the square in front of the Reichstag to the Great Star" (Grass 2000: 14). / "Kurz vor Beginn des Zweiten Weltkriegs wurde sie auf allerhöchsten Befehl abgetragen und vom Vorfeld des Reichstagsgebäudes an den Großen Stern versetzt" (Grass 2012: 21). This relocation under Nazi-rule is, admittedly, less open to symbolic interpretation.

26. "Ja, ja, Berlin wird Weltstadt" – "'Was soll das Ganze!' […] 'Was hat die Demokratie und deren regierende Masse hier zu suchen?'" (Grass 2012: 726).

27. "Diese leichenfleddernde Fernsehproduktion konnte nicht unsere Feier sein. Nichts ist so überflüssig und zugleich verwerflich wie ein abermaliger 'Tag von Potsdam', hieß unsere Devise" (Grass 2012: 727).

28. "Kein großer Zapfenstreich, nur ne kleine Zeremonie, dafür mit Fernsehen, Kanzler, Hohenzollernprinzen … Ist ne ziemlich lange Geschichte …" (Grass 2012: 720, original ellipses).

29. The English translation "take a while" quoted before does not convey that ambiguity.

30. Wuttke is aware that Kleist is a problematic choice as some of his plays glorify nationalism: "hatred of great aesthetic finesse" (Grass 2000: 613) / "Haß auf ästhetisch hohem Niveau" (Grass 2012: 723). This is also why the author of *Die Hermannsschlacht* (1808) is relevant to the discussion. For a study of remembering Kleist, see Pizer 2013.

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31. The Oderland-volume of *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg* contains all the material.

32. According to the national myth, the prince being forced to witness the execution was "an exemplary pedagogical measure: a harsh verdict like this laid the cornerstone for Prussia's greatness" (Grass 2000: 617) / "hatte als pädagogische Maßnahme beispielhaften Charakter: Durch solch hartes Urteil wurde der Grundstein zu Preußens Größe gelegt" (Grass 2012: 728).

33. Although by no means comparable to the neo-Victorian field of studies, there has been a Prussian Renaissance in German literature since reunification, e.g. with Daniel Kehlmann's *Measuring the World* (2005) or Thomas Hettche's *Peacock Island* (2014). There is always a measure of distance, like Kehlmann sustaining an ironic mode via past tense and indirect speech. The trend points toward reworking German self-images with detachment but also with a sense of possible resurgent relevance (see Grabbe 2014: 191).

34. Of course, this still remains a legitimate, poignant question in understanding *Too Far Afield*, as the "pervading sense of loss" or a "perception of waning historical awareness" (Thesz 2003: 435, abstract) has different reasons on the Eastern and the Western side of German collective memory.

35. Self-referential irony comes through in "that absurd if coherent story" (Grass 2000: 577) / "jene absurde, aber in sich schlüssige Geschichte" (Grass 2012: 680), which Hoftaller dishes out to keep Fonty from taking his flight to London.

36. Shaw refers to this as the "conjunctive" type of Waverly-novels: the hero "has a series of encounters that sum up the basic conflicts of his society and historical period" (Shaw 1983: 156).

37. "Doch der Alte – ich sehe ihn diesmal schlohweiß, kurz vorm Fünfundsiebzigsten – weicht aus und macht Ute auf einige eher zufällige Dokumente vom großen Aufstand in Lucknow, 1857, aufmerksam. Damals habe er sich in London und Schottland aufgehalten […]. Noch lange hören wir ihn plaudern und räsonieren" (Grass 1988: 28-29).

38. Cf. "zum Victoria Memorial Museum, diesem steingehauenen Alptraum und letzten Ausweis britischer Kolonialherrschaft" (Grass 1988: 27).

39. Cf. "ziehe ich zwischen Kiplings Verhältnis zum britischen Empire und Fontanes Haßliebe, bezogen auf Preußen, einige schnelle Vergleiche" (Grass 1988: 28).

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