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After the Utopias
A History of Contemporary
German-Language Literature

Translated by Jeff Tapia

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At the Helm

Günter Grass and His Century

[Referring to the pp. 21-28 in the German text]

Of course he was still counting on it; time, however, was slowly running out. One can just picture how a pipe was being smoked slightly more nervously than usual on the day of September 30, 1999 at roughly 1:00 pm in the brisk, overcast town of Behlendorf. After all, this was his century – and it had only one more thing to offer.

The great honour could only come from elsewhere now, and the Nobel Prize committee picked the most cunning moment imaginable since, by that time, Günter Grass had hardly been perceived as a writer in Germany for many years, but rather as a prototype of the meddling intellectual, as an arbiter of society. It was Grass himself who sought out this role. He faithfully spoke out on whatever political issues were currently being debated, and this, in turn, would always influence the discussion of his literary texts. That they were increasingly attacked by the critics had been foreseeable; the result was an oddly dialectical relationship to their success on the market.

With his unbridled novel *Too Far Afield* (German: *Ein weites Feld*) in 1995, Grass once again attempted the big book. He gave his grandiose literary fantasy a suggestive political twist, opposed the unification euphoria of Chancellor Kohl, and sided morally with the population of the German Democratic Republic. The reaction in the media was disastrous. And with his pillar *My Century* (German: *Mein Jahrhundert*), published shortly before the Nobel Prize, Grass seemed to have forever fallen from the zenith of his career. The critics became wearied and mild; they employed light irony in place of mordant acuity. The game appeared to be over at last.

In spite of being continually productive and possessing a long list of publications, Grass has remained, with few exceptions, the author of the *Danzig Trilogy* (1959-1963). There was another echoing response when *The Flounder* (German: *Der Butt*) appeared, and with his little showpiece in 1979 *The Meeting at Telgte* (German: *Das Treffen in Telgte*), which paid homage to Hans Werner Richter and the Gruppe 47, Grass was in his element. As a manifesto on the solidarity and social engagement of writers in the guise of a Baroque-age poet assembly, the novel, with its clever shift in time, is full of gentle references and hefty

blows. And yet no matter what he did, there was one thing above all else he couldn't seem to shake: *The Tin Drum* (German: *Die Blechtrommel*) Being defined by this book nearly became his personal trauma. And meanwhile, it was becoming more and more difficult to make a distinction between his literary texts and his political ones, which, though published separately, still cast a large shadow over his novels and stories. Whether in the apocalyptic vision of *The Rat* (German: *Die Rättin*) (1986), the lunge into Calcutta with *Show Your Tongue* (German: *Zunge zeigen*) (1988), or the dark tirades on the decay of the forests in *Totes Holz* ("Dead Wood"; not available in English) (1990), the political statement seemed to be forever getting in his way. Everything had a scholastic ring to it, and the unambiguous message which was always discernible more or less hindered literary autonomy.

The unification of Germany brought new energy to Grass's political mission. Yet at times he seemed to be a mere imitation of himself, a monolith from the bygone days of political 'men of letters', whereas younger authors were defining the role of the writer for themselves in completely different terms. By all means up-to-date, however, were the ad campaigns of the publisher Steidl Verlag for each new Grass title. Through the Gruppe 47, the author had learned quite early how to effectively deal with the public, and the high gloss brochures prior to the release of *Too Far Afield* set new standards in the marketing of literature. *My Century* was even published in duplicate: the collector's edition done in water color which the author painted especially for the occasion was undeniably impressive.

In *My Century* Grass was doing battle on a very special front; the novel is, in its own way, a key work. Literature and journalism are often in conflict here because in terms of artistic execution they largely resemble one another. Right at the beginning of the novel Grass lashes out quite openly against the "journalists", who are always busy "rehashing" their convictions. A few pages later the surly pronouncement follows: "You journalists always know better anyway!" And finally, the "scoundrel critics" themselves – who are presumably the worst – make their appearance.

These little malicious remarks tend to be made only in passing and are usually tucked away in subordinate clauses. Nonetheless, something profoundly and monstrously seething emerges over time to the surface of the sentence: namely, Günter Grass is not all that detached from the profane business of research and commentary, and the inner dynamic of his sentences appears to testify to precisely this. His "Century" concedes with bravura to the laws of the media. Just in time for the end of the 20th century, Grass rivets his attention on the previous one hundred years, thereby competing with the journalist's trade by attempting to

beat it with its own weapons. At the same time he attempts to cut the Gordian knot: in this book, literature and politics become one.

For such a project, extensive research is necessary, and the individual and oftentimes unassuming sections in *My Century* do in fact contain their share of expertise, whether the text deals with the specific framework of the first German football championships in 1903, the further development in the precision mechanics of the German steel helmet, or the description of various types of mushrooms (here Grass even outdoes Handke!). The years 1914 to 1918 are summed up in a dispute between the existentialist of combat Ernst Jünger and the creator of the great anti-war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (German: *Im Westen nichts Neues*), Erich Maria Remarque. Grass neither assigns Jünger the role of villain, nor does Remarque appear as savior. We have, instead, an objective, impartial perspective which, more than anything else, wants to let these two phenomenons shine on their own. But in fact, this technique of non-intervention belatedly recasts history in a mild light, a result of the soft glow of social democracy. The character in the novel best representing this mitigation is the women's rights activist from Berlin of the year 1919, who states: "We don't want no Kaiser no more for God's sake, and no more turnips. And no more revolution all the time either."

So how does this work, researched to the point of being naturalistic, differ from journalism? The answer is easy: the difference lies in the name Grass. The author speaks with many different voices, and the question soon becomes how all of these first-person narrators relate to one another. But then, starting in 1927, a character whose name is "Grass" begins making appearances throughout the century and will himself increasingly assume historical dimensions. Then in the 1990's, as a typical university instructor from the 60's generation holds a seminar and recalls his political heyday, "that one writer with the walrus mustache" unexpectedly shows up, "who had sold himself to the Es-Pee-Dee and now felt he could accuse us of partaking in 'blind and rabid agitation'".

My Century is a literary fantasy of omnipotence. It altogether annuls the task of journalism. One finds self-stylisations of the author which gloatingly tease the rash critics, as, for example, when Grass's mother, who died at an early age, comes back to life for the final year 1999 and recalls: "The rascal is over seventy by now and has long since made a name for himself. But still won't stop with all his stories. Some of them I even like. In others I wouldn't have hesitated to leave out certain parts."

In *My Century* the writer Grass became a politician once and for all. Shortly thereafter came the Nobel Prize, and with it, a validation of Grass's politics. Overnight everything was

different in the Germany. *Too Far Afield* and *My Century* had both been recently criticized in a manner which Grass described as “snide remarks”. Now, however, along with Grass, Germany, too, was clearly being honoured – and with Germany, the German literary industry as well. At least the latter somewhat felt it was. Germany’s grand TV critic, who in blanket terms had torn apart *Too Far Afield* on the cover of “Der Spiegel”, was now, following the Nobel Prize, intimating that Grass’s next book was going to be something really important. And as the novella *Crabwalk* (German: *Im Krebsgang*) was published in the spring of 2002, the very same “Spiegel” insisted on making a cover story out of it and proclaiming a new historical subject. In describing the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff in the Baltic Sea in 1945, Grass was said to have expressed the Germans’ long repressed suffering from being expelled from their land. It is hard to imagine what the reaction to *Crabwalk* would have been like had it been published prior to the Nobel Prize, or in place of *My Century*. After all, the language in these two books is not particularly different. One can praise or pan both of them, depending on the prevailing circumstances. With someone like Grass, there is never simply the text.

There is, however, still a focal point. There is something that still truly motivates Grass. With the returns and interest from his giant success *The Flounder* at the end of the 1970’s, Grass founded the Alfred Döblin Prize. Through the manner in which the prize awards its authors, Grass hoped to re-introduce the system of workshops which were so constructive for the Gruppe 47. Yet that turned out to be difficult. Over the years, it became more and more common to turn down an invitation to read at one of the Döblin Prize workshops. Fairly well-known writers who had already published one or two books with important publishers did not want to run the risk of coming away with only a consolation prize. For those who believed they already had something to show for themselves, reading and discussing their work in public was felt to be damaging to their reputation. In time, the whole concept of workshops became to be a pain for the authors. By not saying anything, on the other hand, the writers could continue to feel in control. Only a couple of journalists from Berlin, a scant few publishers, and maybe two or three agents were present at the award ceremonies in May, 2003. The names of the authors were largely unknown. The Döblin Prize had mutated into just one of the many arenas for debutantes in which hats get thrown into the ring in the hopes of accidentally landing in one of publicity’s stray, roaming spotlights.

It was only through the presence of Günter Grass that the fiction of a workshop discussion was kept alive – until suddenly it wasn’t a fiction any longer. Grass, in the

meantime 76 years old, was on hand the entire day and listened to each of the readings. Not one of the journalists ever spoke up. The jurors, responsible for the selection of the authors, felt obligated to praise each writer. The authors, who happened not to be on the podium, remained diffidently yet firmly silent. Every now and then one of the publishers said something, a comment about some aspect of the writer's craft such as the use of adjectives or character development. Grass, however, had a grip on everything. At some point he commented on every single reading and discussed the individual character of each text. With his pipe, the source, as it were, of his concentration, he seemed the very likeness of his own self, a symbol for literary history. The overall conditions for such an event have gone through fundamental changes; today, a Gruppe 47 is no longer possible. Yet Grass continues to push for what he once believed to be right. Sometimes writers even have to be protected from themselves, Grass said. They also need to clearly understand that writing is useless. Too much support for debutants and too much training do more harm than good.

Perhaps events such as the Alfred Döblin Prize will be one of the few that remain once the boom for contemporary German-language literature is over. Perhaps the time will come again in which even the more popular authors will consider it necessary to face the challenges they find here. But perhaps until then, we'll just have to stick it out.

Both a Threat and a Temptation

Christa Wolf and the Public Sphere

[Referring to the pp. 28-36 in the German text]

In order to understand the phenomenon Christa Wolf, cultural-political facts are of secondary importance. Even by researching in archives and bringing vast amounts of material to light, or by studying the resolutions passed at party conventions and by the Central Committee - as well as Christa Wolf's reaction to them - one will be unable, nonetheless, to fully grasp the singular impact this author has made. In 1982, West Germany also got a sense of this as Christa Wolf held her "Frankfurt Lectures" in the city's largest auditorium. This rather dismal hall, together with the adjoining rooms in which the event was televised, resembled a place of worship. Even today there still hangs in the subway station Bockenheimer Warte a heavily faded, black-and-white picture taken at this event in which the author can be seen heading for the lectern like a creature from another planet as the masses step back in awe.

This was nothing new in East Germany. A fellow writer once noted with visible envy that Christa Wolf strode through the pews “like a shaman”. In the final years of the GDR, the Church was the place where people with divergent opinions sought refuge, and as a writer, Christa Wolf fulfilled the duties of a spiritual leader. When she gave a reading, it was like a high mass; her books were like scriptures of self-enlightenment.

The key to Christa Wolf’s impact lies in her subjectivity. For East German standards, she dared remarkably early to say “I”, an unmistakably female “I” which proved a source of identification for many people. The intimations of this “I” extended far beyond any national territory; there was something about it which crossed human and national borders. Then in 2003 Christa Wolf published a book which to a certain extent made her previous literary experiments inconsequential. It is a volume of diary-like notes entitled *Ein Tag im Jahr* (“One Day A Year”; not available in English yet). Its importance lies in the fact that here for the first time Christa Wolf fully discloses her private life, thus steeping her subjectivity in everyday events. By means of this book, one can gauge Wolf’s entire oeuvre.

Ein Tag im Jahr – here that refers forty times to the day September 27. In 1960 the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* asked writers to give a detailed description of a normal day in their life. Christa Wolf has continued this ritual until today, the result of which is a book highlighting September 27 from 1960 to 2000. We learn nothing of the many major events of the last forty years. There is no chronology, nor are the relationships to individual people traced from beginning to end. The book is about shopping, about looking for sweaters for her daughter, about fixing breakfast. At times the notes detailing her daily life reach the heights of a Thomas Mann. Nothing sensational will be found here. And yet one secretly recognizes a development in the author through the changing atmosphere of her writing. Her subjectivity, however, remains a mystery to herself at times.

Christa Wolf was never able to invent anything. With *The Quest for Christa T.* (German: *Nachdenken über Christa T.*), an investigation into the convictions of a friend who died at an early age, she intoned in 1968 her specific Christa Wolf sound for the first time: a sensitive examination of her own moods and feelings woven within a catchy rhythm and a constant shifting between doubt and compulsion. Christa Wolf spoke in autobiographical terms in several of her literary texts: *Juninachmittag* (“A June Afternoon”; not available in English), *Accident: A Day’s News*, (German: *Störfall*), *Sommerstück* (“On Summer”; not available in English), *What Remains* (German: *Was bleibt*), and *Leibhaftig* (“In Person”; not available in English). The entries in *Ein Tag im Jahr* feel like these novels in concentrated form, like the ultimate logic of her writing – even though they are completely unliterary. The

category of subjectivity, which became a central aspect of Christa Wolf's writing, owes its attraction to the conflict between the individual and society; and whereas Christa Wolf's work could initially profit by placing these two poles in relation to one another, in the end they each stood in complete isolation. Yet it is extremely difficult to determine the specific moment in which this change took place – the notes in *Ein Tag im Jahr* illustrate this very clearly.

Christa Wolf's "I" has such sharp contours because it has an ally and adversary which is contoured just as sharply: the State. At the outset of the 1950's, East Germany was considered by many in Christa Wolf's generation to be the great project of hope. Hans Mayer, whom she studied under in Leipzig from 1951 to 1953, and many others who emigrated to the GDR came to represent a better Germany. In the notebook's first two entries (1960 and 1961), as Christa Wolf was volunteering in a factory under the banner of the "Bitterfelder Weg", her dedication to the ideals of a socialist society are still relatively intact; she understands production as an incentive. Yet a slightly different tone can already be felt running through the entry for September 27, 1962, following her move to Kleinmachnow near Potsdam. Her new neighbor is Frieder Schlotterbeck, a communist originally from Swabia who spent time in a concentration camp under the Nazis, then opted to go to East Germany after the war where he was promptly thrown into jail for many years for his dissenting political beliefs. In short, a prototypical German life.

Christa Wolf, who wanted to play an active role in advocating political ideals, falls into conflict with herself on account of literature as she attempts to put these ideals into practice. It is a slow process at first. She registers only a slight irritation, which, she feels, may be fruitful for her writing. A sense of indignation can be witnessed even in the 1970's as workers of the state-owned service industries offer to "take care of things themselves" – no, the Wolfs would rather stick to state structures. Later, she will note full of resignation: the upholsterer, the chairs which are in bad need of repair – he'll "take care of it himself".

The 11th plenum of the Central Committee in December, 1965, which came to signify an important cultural-political juncture, gets mentioned only in passing. Yet the gradual doubt Christa Wolf feels of ever being able to realize her ideals, the gradual doubt she feels of the existence of an actual East Germany; these doubts, caught in a type of pre-consciousness without any concrete facts to refer to, will begin to be expressed in ever clearer terms. Thus the images one finds of officials and bureaucrats. Through them the State is perceived as a subject. They are the ones who prevent, who interfere, who are against literature. They are the careerists who have nothing to do any longer with the ideals which once shaped Christa Wolf. Yet since the problem is given a face, the idea as such remains inviolate. Something

continues to haunt her: the experiences she made when she was young are still at work – and such experiences are known to be the most sweeping.

Christa T., the protagonist in the novel in which Christa Wolf came into her own, is marked by an illness which readers immediately understood symbolically: she was suffering from the GDR. It is noteworthy that in the time following the publication of this book the first mention is made in her journal of hospital stays, extended treatments, and illness. Her body had begun to react. In the Mahlow Waldkrankenhaus Hospital Christa Wolf has frequent discussions with the philosopher Wolfgang Heise – yet in all the theoretical passages, even through the 1990's, she never interprets or argues abstractly, never employs distanced or objectified language. In a natural and sincere way, she comes across as being naïve. Her appointments with the psychotherapist M. in the state apparatus clinic of the Charité Hospital are characterized by the same mechanisms. The make-up she decides to wear, how she inwardly prepares for the appointments, and how the doctor's authority becomes all-embracing all reveal that Christa Wolf's subjectivity has nothing of the emancipation efforts – “self-realization” and the “new sensibility” – simultaneously underway in the West in the wake of the 1968 movement. Yet both sentiments were based on left-wing ideals, and it was this that made the reception of Christa Wolf so vehement in the West. Here is also where certain misconceptions began which, to a large extent, can explain the disapproval she met with following 1989.

After Honecker assumed office, official attempts were made to slightly liberalize the society, and Christa Wolf's conversation in 1973 with the secretary of the Writer's Union, Gerhard Henniger, marks a decisive turning point. Christa Wolf rejects the offer to be elected to the board of the union. The resoluteness of her husband Gerhard Wolf, who is often mentioned in amiable fashion as her political ally, is juxtaposed in this year's entry with the wavering and deliberation of the author, yet prevails in the end. That in the meantime something has changed can clearly be seen by two comments Christa Wolf makes on the outstanding East German writer Fritz Rudolf Fries. In 1969 she writes of his novel *Der Weg nach Oobliadooh* (“The Way to Oobliadooh”; not available in English): “This book takes a totally disillusioned view of life for granted. Though disillusioned is too flattering a term: there was never anything to hold illusions about to begin with. I have to accept that; it's there, apparently, but it's new to me.” Then in 1980 she writes: “The others, who are working in journalism, are addressing problems, but aren't breaking any new poetic ground either. Though that's exactly what we should be doing. We've been overburdened with problems and conflicts all these years. Our heads and hands haven't been free. I'm now gradually

getting to that point, I think. I also think that ‘Christa T.’ is a beginning, and that a book like Fries’s *Oobliadooh*, which still isn’t going to be published, is also pointing in the same direction.”

The best time in Christa Wolf’s life – and this is the key to several aspects – seems to have been in the years when the intellectuals’ last illusions about the GDR went up in smoke: after 1976, when Wolf Biermann was forced to leave the country. The Wolfs began renovating an old farmhouse, complete with thatched roof, in Mecklenburg in 1975, and up until 1983, when the house burnt down, one finds occasional flashes of what may be considered happiness and moments of peace. Their house in Mecklenburg was like a sequestered island of privacy. It was the location of their inner-emigration. The majority of the Wolfs’ friends left the country; the separation from Sarah Kirsch was presumably the most painful. Yet at the same time, Christa Wolf finds an oasis of tranquillity in Mecklenburg. Here she can watch trees grow which she planted herself. Here she can observe the changing of the seasons. There is an especially moving scene during a walk the Wolfs take under a starry sky. As the village comes into view, Christa and Gerhard Wolf both realize something without saying a word: “This is what we’ve been after.”

Christa Wolf abided in East Germany after Biermann’s expatriation, and the house in Mecklenburg may be considered the best explanation for her doing so. Such a serene existence would not have been possible in the West. Christa Wolf puts the GDR behind her and at the same time resolves to no longer dwell upon why she is staying. The area in Mecklenburg has something old German and Romantic about it: the nature, the wealth of trades still being practiced, and the abundant homemade items are all decisive factors. It is no coincidence that *No Place on Earth* (German: *Kein Ort. Nirgends*), in which Christa Wolf depicts the moral climate of artists alienated from society, gets written here, against the backdrop of German Romanticism. *No Place on Earth* is mentioned only in passing in *Ein Tag im Jahr*, yet is present in the elderberries, apple trees, homemade cakes, and culinary arts of Gerhard Wolf.

In the 1980’s, trips to the West become a matter of course. She is at the funeral of Heinrich Böll in 1985 and meets Max Frisch in Zurich in 1986. She mainly describes the impressions the West makes on her. These descriptions stand in stark contrast to her shopping experiences in East German department stores and Intershops. An entry from the year 1979 furnishes the reader with a very clear view of how the author sees herself. Her description of a reading she gives in the town of Crivitz and the intensive debates of issues which normally were not discussed culminates in the remark: “The evening was exceptional.”

These readers need her, and they are the reason for Christa Wolf to remain in East Germany. That is what she expects from herself, even though it contradicts her continual assertions that she is unable to fulfil the role she has been given. She conjures up precisely that which she, in turn, suffers from. She accepts the role of *primadonna dolorosa* of the GDR, as the newspaper *Leipziger Volkszeitung* later calls her in the 1990's, and at the same time she would like to be a normal person like everybody else. This conflict – her drive towards a public life which likewise proves more than she can handle – accompanies Christa Wolf her whole life. Although, as with little else in the book, it is not analysed, it is readily apparent through numerous details. The reader may similarly infer that she, a refugee as a child and, thus, a foreigner, was in search of community even more than others in the early days of the GDR and desired to participate and be socially active. Christa Wolf avoids any reflections on the subject. Instead, she puts her private life and day-to-day concerns on display – cautiously and prudently. This is precisely the root of what makes her an author – this aspect in her writing which promotes identification.

The manner in which Christa Wolf deals with the public has been shaped by a closed society. Her public appearances in East Germany always seemed as if they were informal circles or secret societies. They were characterized by a general consent that there was no need for precise distinctions. Disputes took place within a self-contained sphere which offered Christa Wolf more security than she may subjectively have felt to be the case. The foes were the dogmatists and officials. In the new and larger German state, however, there is a form of public life the likes of which Christa Wolf had never encountered. Prior to the end of the GDR, the Western public sphere had always been an ally. Now this very same public sphere, with its media and its manner of discussing and disputing, is felt to be just the opposite. The Western media have taken over the role of the dogmatists and officials; they penetrate into the author-reader relationship which had thus far been considered a sheltered and approbatory zone. “The author is an important person,” Christa Wolf once wrote. That was a problem in the GDR, and has remained so under new circumstances.