Room for manoeuvre.

The role of intertext in Elfriede Jelinek’s *Die Klavierspielerin*, Günter Grass’s *Ein weites Feld* and Herta Müller’s *Niederungen* and *Reisende auf einem Bein*.

Morwenna Caroline Symons

PhD

University College London

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Abstract

My thesis addresses the text-intertext-reader relationship, a field of force that articulates dialectically complex issues of authority and control. Taking as my point of departure established reader theories that explore the reader’s role in realising the text and its effects, I look specifically at the role played by the intertext in this. I understand intertext both as precisely traceable citation and more broadly as the use of anterior and/or exterior discourses that take on ‘quotational’ force in the new text.

The intertext both corroborates and undermines the sovereignty of the new text, and the reader is a compounding presence, since s/he is in receipt of the text, subject to its power, and yet positioned to disempower the text by re-locating it in a new universe of signification. My thesis attempts to demonstrate that the room for manoeuvre granted to the reader at these particularly unstable points of the text functions as a dynamic narrative space – a space which, as I try to show, offers a critical resource for articulating and apprehending the text’s thematic concerns.

My understanding of this dynamic relationship is set out through readings of texts by three authors, which, however distinct in form and method, seem to me to enshrine these issues. In Die Klavierspielerin, I argue that the pornographic, psychoanalytic and musical intertexts form a discursive nexus of effects that is central to the construction of a highly ironic narrative voice: the reader is required to consolidate the effects of this irony, and in so doing is given critical space to reflect upon the power structures that Jelinek seeks to portray. The intertextual game of Ein weites Feld, its impossibly broad historical and literary sweep, creates a text that is structurally and thematically ‘out of control’: by this means, I suggest, Grass brings the reader into confrontation with the celebratory discourses of German reunification. Herta Müller’s depiction of the village idyll in Niederungen embraces and disrupts the Heimat genre: I explore the dialectical force of the narrative voice as at once subjectively innocent and knowing, and suggest
that the quotational mode, and our discomfort in responding to it, is what allows for the critical articulation of questions of authority and control with which the stories are concerned. My reading of Reisende auf einem Bein focuses on Müller’s use of a Calvino intertext: I argue that the intertext plays a fundamental role in the development of a central character whose elusive quality reflects (on) thematic issues addressed by the text.
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Introduction

‘Intertextuality’, as a recognised term, is a relative newcomer on the critical scene and it remains a problematic and unwieldy tool in critical discourse, reflecting its ubiquitous employment as a way of formalising a vast number of different techniques and effects. These range from direct, conscious citation by one author of another, to an assimilation of certain methodological approaches, to much more elusive uses relying on subtle allusions (intentionally interwoven by the author) and echoes (of which even the author may not be aware). My treatment of the term does not attempt to make of it something more precise, but rather to bring it to prominence in all its breadth, and thereby to confront the dynamics of intertextuality in modern prose narrative. My thesis does not stand as a record of sources to be found in these authors’ texts, and nor do I intend it to be read as such. But I do hope to be able to argue that ‘intertextuality’, after the ‘death of the author’, after postmodernism and its suspicion of grand narratives, not only remains a highly useful resource for articulating social and political issues, but also offers us a way of approaching and coming to a better understanding of the textual processes of signification that accompany the reader’s journey through the text and that dictate his or her relationship with it. It is my contention that these textual processes are of primary importance in the communication of the fictional world, and in the formulation of a critical response to it. To this end, I offer readings of texts by three different authors, all of whom variously employ intertextual devices in the service of cultural critique.

‘Who is speaking?’: theories of authorship

My approach assumes the reader to be an active force in the textual make-up, existing interdependently with the author in a reciprocal relationship. Both author and reader exercise an element of control over the text, the author in her/his choice of material and
presentation, the reader in the manner in which s/he responds. Both, by the same token, are in receipt of the text and subject to its effects, in that it is always already charged by the presence of the other. My thesis, understanding the reader as constitutive in the text’s formation, an integral part of its narrative structure, thus depends fundamentally on relatively recent theoretical developments that have redressed the critical neglect of the reader’s role in the text. Until the latter half of the last century the reader was almost always placed in an entirely passive role in relation to the text and the author. The emergence of the reader as an active force has meant a huge shift in critical approaches to literature; in particular, it has meant that we can no longer look with confidence to the authority of the author, because the reader’s presence confounds the previously assumed association of the author with absolute knowledge of and legislation of her/his own work. Seán Burke, in the introduction to his study *Authorship: From Plato to Postmodern*, gives a detailed historical account of the changing position of the author and of the various roles in which s/he has been cast over time.\(^1\) According to Burke, the medieval view of the author placed him under the *auctoritas* of God, and his writings were cast as manifestations of an external inspirational force. He did not create an original, but represented or acted out an essentially public discourse of tradition and religion. Until the emergence of (what we think of as) the ‘traditional’ author figure at the end of the eighteenth century, the author was only one figure in a collection of other skilled workers involved in the production of a book. Equally important were the printers, copiers, publishers, and so on. Only at the time of the Romantics did authority start to be transferred into the power of the individual consciousness. Whereas before, the author had been considered simply to mirror his world, now there was an increasing recognition of the role of the imagination in giving it representative form. Against the backdrop of Kant’s emerging postulation of transcendent idealism, whereby the world is

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constructed through a reality imposed constitutively upon it by human consciousness, the poetic subordination of nature to author gained currency. The individual poetic mind, previously thought to mimic the divine, gradually came to supplant it, the author gaining status as some sort of Creator-God himself. Although the author proceeded in what was now primarily a subjective economy, he was also transcendent of his work, an impersonal, disinterested creator: just as God is omnipresent and transcendent, the author can now 'be identified with the entirety of a work whilst being nowhere visible within the work.' (22) Burke suggests that the dual impulse towards subjectivity and disinterestedness characteristic of this period can be explained as an attempt to guard against the 'destabilizing ramifications' (23) of acknowledging human subjectivity as a replacement for the divine.

This view of the author was continued in the modernist tradition of impersonality, which attempted to extricate the author from the tendency developing in late nineteenth century criticism to psychologise the figure of the author. The status of the subjective author was such that s/he was proclaimed as the last authority on the text under her/his name. Thus, reading had become a process of de-coding the text with the intention of coming as close as possible to an understanding of what the author meant by a particular word or phrase and by the text as a whole. Particularly importantly, the author was credited with a thorough knowledge and understanding of her/his own text and characters, and was assumed to be reliable, even when not omnipotent. The modernists’ reaction to this tendency can be seen in the attempt to reduce the significance of the author’s personality, to reclaim the notion of the author liberated from her/his subjective emotions and recast her/him as a transcendent genius. Yet, as Burke points out, such pretensions to impersonality, which reach their conclusion in the dictum of the Death of the Author (which I shall discuss in more detail below), are always inevitably threatened by the unarguable fact of our individuality and situatedness, something which forms the
cornerstone of Nietzsche’s riposte to Kant’s transcendental subjectivity. For Burke, ‘the characteristic Nietzschean interrogation (‘who is speaking? And why speaking thus?’) [...] opens the space of a stringent ethical critique by retracing a text first to its author and thence to the ethical drives which motivated that text or system.’ (25) Burke’s emphasis on the continuing theoretical importance of the figure of the author is essentially ethically based: it is, he suggests, precisely in the particularity of the author where we can mount a challenge to totalising discourses and their privileged claim to truth, by reconceiving of authorship as ‘a situated activity present not so much to itself as to culture, ideology, language, difference, influence, biography.’ (26)

Burke’s historical analysis of the figure of the author and his insistence on the continued theoretical and practical relevance of a concept of authorship is grounded in a belief in the environmental context in which the author, together with his or her work, is situated. The issue of whether where the author is writing from is of relevance is something that has long been a central issue in thinking about texts. The Anglo-American movement referred to as New Criticism, most influential during the 1950s, was not so much a school of thought as a collection of theorists loosely associated by a desire to find critical purchase from within, rather than outside, the text. For the New Critics, the text is autonomous, and treated in critical analysis as separate from the socio-cultural realm into which it is born. Their advocacy of practical criticism stemmed from a belief that meaning is internal, to be found in the poetic structure of the text itself. I.A.Richard’s *Practical Criticism* (1929), a central text for the New Critics, is an account of an experiment in which students interpreted different poems ‘blind’: its findings, namely that different readers have radically different interpretative frameworks, to some extent reflects New Criticism’s difficulty with its own
methodology. How is it possible to reconcile the notion of an autonomous text, freed from authorial intentionality, with the subjective role played by individual readers?

This is precisely the question that arises in response to Roland Barthes’ work on the text, which has been influential in developing a theory of readership. Barthes coined the expression ‘the Death of the Author’ as part of an attempt to loosen the continuing ‘sway of the Author’ in and beyond the text. He is critical of the way in which previous interpretations of the text, being explained away through the author’s characteristics, allow the text itself to disappear and become ultimately transparent. The proclamation of the Death of the Author is an exhortation to the reader, a bid to restore depth and opacity to the text. Barthes rejects the capitalist construction of the modern author, where ‘the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author confiding in us.’ (143) Condemning the tendencies in so-called ordinary culture to psychologise the author-person, Barthes insists that ‘it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, “performs”, and not “me”.’ (143) To predicate the author as an individual pre-existing the text is to relegate the text to a secondary status, whereas understanding the author as a linguistic subject in the textual body alters the temporality of the relationship between author and text: traditionally thought of as one of father/child, the ‘modern scriptor’ as a performative formed in the act of enunciation itself, is ‘born simultaneously with the text’. (145) And in dismantling the hierarchy of this relationship by challenging the assumption that the

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author knows and is in charge of her/his text, Barthes also frees the reader from that traditional pursuit of authorial meaning:

[A] text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (148)

Barthes’ ‘elimination’ of the author figure is, on one level, revolutionary, as it heralds the end of the hegemonic reign of the author, and brings the neglected reader into theoretical focus. However, the reader, conceived of as a space of inscription, is fated to remain for Barthes a purely theoretical construct, just like the scriptor himself, who ‘no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions’. (147) In practical terms, there is no reader who simply disentangles a text without also deciphering its ‘meaning’, no reader who does not have a field of reference which s/he brings to the text. And although, as I have emphasised, the reader figure as a theoretical device is useful as a way of illustrating the potential of moving away from the author figure and his control over the text, the formulation is problematic. Barthes does not address the question of how the reader comes to understand the ‘total existence of writing’ (148), given that s/he is also a radically de-personalised subject ‘without history, biography, psychology’. (148) How can the reader represent the ‘single field’ of the text’s unity, if s/he is an open space, and like the author devoid of an identity and terms of reference? What is it that privileges the reader over the author, if neither is able to negotiate the text’s myriad pathways in a differentiated manner?

Barthes’ formulation of the author is both supported and challenged by Michel Foucault in his essay of the following year, ‘What is an Author?’, in which Foucault doubts the theoretical possibility of the author’s disappearance from the text.⁴ He insists that there are a number of historically determined and culturally specific ‘author-

functions' still present in all textual approaches. Were the author to disappear, then so too would the locus of critique which depends on the name of the author for its articulation. Foucault sees the author as present in the text, but not as an individual; instead, reformulated as the author-function, s/he exists within discourse, and yet retains a regulating stance with regards to the text. S/he is still an author in the sense of having occupied a certain position of (culturally continuous) discourse at a certain moment, and more importantly, is only one of many who, having accepted the system of signs and symbols, could potentially occupy the same ground. Foucault shows himself unwilling to advance any distance along the path of the impersonalising tradition, and his argument consequently avoids the theoretical impasse with which the New Critics, and to some extent, Barthes, are confronted: namely, how to proceed theoretically in the absence of a thinking subject in discourse and how, practically, to come to terms with the presence of individual readers with a subjective, situated response.

These issues have found a particular focus in the field of feminist literary theory. Feminist theory in general has long been in debate as to the advantageousness of holding on to a concept of the (female) subject: something of a schism has opened up between those theorists who celebrate the possibilities suggested by a 'feminine' impetus towards multiplicity and plurality, and those who argue that the move towards a fragmentation of the self brings with it the threat of relinquishing the – already fragile – autonomy of the female subject. Nancy K. Miller’s work on female authorship reflects these debates in its concern to find a strategic balance between, on the one hand, a welcome liberation from the 'interpretive securities of Authorship' and, on the other

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hand, the continuing relevance of and need for ‘the signature of a woman’s writing’. For Miller, Barthes’ post-structuralist account of textuality is of inestimable value to feminist criticism, insofar as it represents a destabilisation of the institutionalised authority of the male writer. Yet at the same time, she argues, this emphasis on writing and textuality at the expense of the subject entails the erasure of a specifically female writing experience, something that she believes is essential to a feminine critical project:

The postmodernist decision that the Author is Dead and the subject along with him does not [...] necessarily hold for women, and prematurely forecloses the question of agency for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had, they have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc. Because the female subject has juridically been excluded from the polis, hence decentered, “disoriginated,” deinstitutionalized, etc., her relation to integrity and textuality, desire and authority, displays structurally important differences from that universal position. (106)

Miller’s concern not to lose sight of the (female) subject in writing is nevertheless articulated from a position that manages to avoid a return to an essentialist notion of the Woman writer: her work, explicitly indebted to Barthesian theories of textuality, demonstrates how these theories can be productively recouped in the service of a situated, political account of authorship.

**Reader theory: developments and tendencies**

From the 1970s onwards, critics began to formalise approaches that used the reader, in her/his various forms, as the primary point of departure for textual analysis. The branch of criticism known collectively as reader theory can, in many ways, be thought of as having its roots in a reaction to the New Critical reliance on the formal properties of the text. Reader theorists refuted the claim made by Beardsley and Wimsatt, the central tenet of New Criticism, that the reader’s response to the text should (and could) be

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dismissed along with the author’s intentions. In the aftermath of New Criticism, reader theory re-located the text in a cultural and political environment and revalidated the need for context in relation to interpretative practices. Because of the vast area that reader theory covers, I cannot offer more than an outline of its main characteristics and tendencies; this will though, I hope, allow me to introduce my own understanding of that indeterminate term ‘the reader’, and to anticipate those pitfalls that this project, like any other concerned with the vast conceptual field of the reader, will encounter.

Beyond a unifying move to assert the centrality of the reader’s place in the literary arena, reader theory has taken wildly different forms, depending on the particular way in which each critic conceives of ‘the reader’ and the methodology s/he employs to illustrate the implications of any one approach. For some critics, the reader is marshalled as a theoretical aid in explications of the text and its form; for others, s/he is a real individual among other literal readers, who collectively provide a way of assessing the impact of individual texts on individual people. The latter approach is often described as reader-response theory, and can be differentiated from the German school of reception theory, whose most prominent members are Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. However, a brief look at some of the critics associated with different areas of reader theory will suffice to show how necessarily broad the terms are.

Hans Robert Jauss’s work in the field is primarily dedicated to historical issues in reception theory. In his essay, ‘Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft’, he argues that by seeing literature in a historical context, the way is paved for a more nuanced understanding of literature’s role in shaping the consciousness of readers at any given historical period: an analysis of readers’ differing

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responses to a text at different historical points might allow us better to comprehend how our understanding is historically determined.\(^8\) Wolfgang Iser, by contrast, develops a systematic structural account of the text, using examples from English literature to illustrate how meaning is produced in the act of reading.\(^9\) His theory is based on an understanding of the text as being made up of places of indeterminacy (he takes the term ‘Unbestimmtheitsstellen’ from Ingarden), ‘gaps’ or ‘blanks’ in the text which the reader, drawing on her/his own knowledge and expectation of the world, automatically fills. Each time the reader fills a gap s/he modifies her/his idea of the text, and so is engaged in a constant process of re-adjustment to her/his horizon of expectation. Iser does not attempt to substantiate the figure of the reader, who is implied, rather than real: perhaps this has to do with Iser’s understanding of experience as something so radically individuated that each person is faced with the absolute ‘inexperienciality’ of his interlocutor, and can do no more than draw on what s/he supposes the other to be thinking. This phenomenon, for Iser, explains the need for interpretation itself, and the way that the reader is propelled through the text as a creative interrogator of its effects.

In Anglo-American reader theory, the reader is treated in very different ways. The most subjective approach is that taken by critics such as David Bleich, who uses a study of his students as a method of tracing the origins of individual interpretation.\(^10\) This approach has the advantage that, in taking real readers and their documented responses as the basis of a study, the critic avoids the accusation that s/he has extrapolated a supposedly objective critical opinion out of a theoretical notion of the ‘reader’ (and one that consequently admits to no subjective role in formulating that opinion). However, the limitations of this ‘straw poll’ approach are fairly obvious: in Bleich’s case, for example, we can assume the students to be a fairly homogenous sample of the

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population, drawn from a highly specific cultural background, a fact that circumscribes
the usefulness of the notionally ‘subjective’ methodology.

As a hypothetical entity, the figure of the reader is obviously much more difficult to
pin down, and s/he appears under various mantles. S/he can be thought of as the
‘narratee’, formed in the narrator’s direct address or appeal, and taking on the force of a
fictional character in the text. This is the reader Gerald Prince identifies, for example,
making an absolute distinction between the hypothetical narratee within the text and the
real reader outside.\textsuperscript{11} The hypothetical reader, more subtly, may be one implied by the
text, and invited to fill in its indeterminacies. It may also be the intended reader, that is
the reader who comes into existence not so much in the text itself but \textit{receptively}, in a
study of the context of the text. Questions of reader competence are at issue here,
because these sorts of studies tend to consider the interplay between a text and its ‘best’
hypothetical reader, that is the reader most equipped to understand the conventions of
narrative techniques and most thoroughly to exploit the text’s semantic and linguistic
potential. Stanley Fish’s ‘informed reader’, for example, is an abstract entity who has
succeeded in accessing the whole ‘meaning’ of the text by way of his/her competence in
hearing the full range of possible responses that the text evokes.\textsuperscript{12} However, these
positions are themselves often unclear within the work of individual critics. Peter
Rabinowitz, in his excellent assessment of the field, points out that most reader critics,
Iser and Fish among them, conceive of different readers throughout their work, but blur
the distinction between these types, so creating a ‘hybrid’ that takes no account of the
radically differing critical effect of these various readerly roles.\textsuperscript{13} Rabinowitz himself
distinguishes between the actual audience, the ‘flesh-and-blood […] audience over

\textsuperscript{11} Gerald Prince, ‘Introduction to the Study of the Narratee’, in \textit{Reader-Response Criticism: From
Formalism to Post-Structuralism}, ed. by Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins
\textsuperscript{12} Stanley Fish, \textit{Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities} (Cambridge,
\textsuperscript{13} Peter J. Rabinowitz, \textit{Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation}
which the author has no guaranteed control’ (20), the authorial audience, created out of
the author’s rhetorical projection of ‘assumptions about the readers’ beliefs, knowledge,
and familiarity with conventions’ (21) and the narrative audience, as the ‘role which the
text forces the reader to take on’ in order to accept the ‘truth’ of events portrayed in the
novel (95).

The theoretical basis that unifies these many critical approaches to the reader, namely
the emphasis on contextualisation for the production and explanation of meaning, has
made reader theory an especially useful forum for critics working with concepts of
gender and ethnicity. Janice Radway, for example, collates responses to popular
literature from non-academic women, evaluating how factors of gender, class and
ethnicity affect the reading process. Her approach offers a radical challenge to the
notion that there is one correct (white, male, academic) interpretation of texts, and also
confronts the hierarchical structures erected in the process of marginalising those who
have no access to the canon. For Radway, meaning is located not so much in the texts as
in the ethnic environment in which they are read: each response is as valid as the next.14
Judith Fetterley’s feminist reappraisal of American fictional writing from the canon
raises issues about how response is constructed and manipulated.15 She argues that the
compliant female reader, caught up in the perspective of the author, is subjected to and
eventually comes to acquiesce in male ideologies that are otherwise naturally alien to
her. Fetterley’s re-readings of well-known texts and characters both identify those anti-
female ideologies that she sees at work and show exactly how it is possible to occupy a
readerly position deliberately at odds with that expected of the compliant reader. Her
argument is persuasive precisely because it takes full account of the effects of authorial
expectations on the reader: the tension generated when a female reader ‘fails’ to be

14 Janice Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (Chapel Hill:
15 Judith Fetterley, The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction (Bloomington:
competent provides the starting point for an articulate feminist counter-stance to a prevailing discourse. For Fetterley, herself writing 'against' the stream, reading is not so much a question of competence (a critical position which potentially comes close to a reassertion of the author’s ‘tyrannical’ hold over the reader) as of being actively aware of processes of control and manipulation at work in the making of meaning.

I hope that I have shown, in this brief account of different approaches to the reader in and outside the text, the extent of the theoretical and practical difficulties with which critics working in this area have been faced. Constructing any theory of readership almost inevitably results in the omission or occlusion of those real readers in whose name the theory is erected, whilst methodologies that use individual readers as the basis for a study at least partially preclude more general qualifications of the subjective material. The complexity of the figure of the reader is, though, precisely what gives these critics the scope to debate with the text and its effects, and in this sense, it seems fair to say that the steps taken in this field have come about not so much through stabilising the reader as through exploring the suggestiveness of her/his role. In this sense, we can understand 'the reader' as a constitutive part of a textual drama played out on numerous levels, and rightly resistant to our interrogations. My own use of the term 'reader' will depend very much on an understanding of the abstract dimension that s/he brings to the text: rather than inquire principally after the nature of the reader, I shall try to describe the place s/he occupies in the text, and the field of force of which s/he is a part and out of which a critical response to the text may be crafted. However, I do presuppose a more concrete, situated version of the reader, one who can be identified in terms of a particular social or political stance that is a prerequisite for apprehending a text's thematic concerns. In so doing, I attempt, albeit implicitly, to account also for the fact that my own response to individual texts is itself framed by a pre-existing set of
expectations, expectations that demonstrably inform my critical analysis at every juncture.

The intertextual dialectic

In my discussion of the changing attitude towards author and reader, I have tried to emphasise that in introducing the reader more forcefully into the text, the author is not necessarily banished from the text, but rather can be productively recast as a figure who never did have the 'authority' which her/his name supposed. As I have shown, reader theories privilege the text as an open structure inviting response, and in doing focus on actual processes of signification operative in the text. It is not my intention, in following this approach, to divest the author of agency: rather, I am interested in the way that the text functions as a site of exchange and interdependency between author and reader. It seems to me that both author and reader, in writing and reading, are engaged in projects of self-examination that inevitably recall the figure of the other. For the author, there are countless decisions to be made regarding the intention of the work, its aesthetic form, and so on. Which audience is being targeted, a specific or a general group (age, ethnicity, gender), a specialist or layperson, and what intellectual demands are being made on that audience? Central to those considerations is the question of the author's own position in the text that bears her/his name. Why is this subject of primary interest? Is the text autobiographically motivated? Does the author identify with the characters and their relations in the text, or does s/he desire to retain some God's eye perspective? Is the author writing self-consciously in any particular identifiable tradition, or does s/he desire to break the grain and forge a path away from the expected? For example, if she 'writes like a woman', or equally if she does not, is she making a political statement?¹⁶

These questions serve to anchor the author in her/his personal frame of reference, and provide the basis for a justification of authorship. At the same time they exacerbate the crisis of authorship by demanding that there exist legitimate reasons for these choices. Similar questions are raised regarding the manner in which the reader finds her-/himself positioned in relation to the text. Why has the reader picked upon that particular text? Does s/he expect to align her-/himself with the text, identify with the characters, trust the author? Is s/he approaching the text with a particular personal agenda already clearly established? Will s/he read it differently on another occasion? These many and ill-defined questions make up the reader’s universe of self-legitimation in much the same way and as actively as the author’s. Both are in thrall to the text in the sense that they accept that its context exerts some hold over them; both sense the transformative quality of their own participation in the text. The text, in other words, compels a degree of self-examination, whether or not it is deliberate or even acknowledged.

More interestingly still, the engagement between author and reader continues at every point in the text: every word contributes to that delicate fulcrum of signification on which their textual relationship rests, and which defines the text as inherently unstable. Author and reader are linked textually through anterior discourses, but the text is also the site at which their differing experiences become apparent. Their relationship is one of concurrence and divergence, and is formed both within and outside the text. The text is not a hermetic whole, presented to the reader as a fait accompli. It is, rather, a dynamic system, since every word in that text has wide-ranging associations that may or may not accord with the intentions of the author. Julia Kristeva’s coining of the term ‘intertextuality’ in response to Bakhtin’s conception of dialogic discourse is based on an

woman ‘can imitate men in her writing, or strive for an impersonality beyond sex, but finally she must write as a woman: what other way is there?’ (p. 35) Kamuf makes the point that a feminist criticism of this nature becomes unproductive in its ‘tautological’ tendency towards the idea that ‘women’s writing is writing signed by women.’ (p. 285)
understanding of the text as an infinite deferral of self-sufficient wholeness and integrity. The sense of closure and stability attributed to a text is illusory, because every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an inter-textuality) [...] its “place” of enunciation and its denoted “object” are never single, complete and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated.

Theories of influence based in explorations of lineages of authorial relations are thus, in many ways, at odds with Kristeva’s original formulation of the concept, being more concerned with tracing and stabilising sources than with any consideration of the effect of the transposition of texts (a term that Kristeva later preferred to employ). Harold Bloom’s study of Romantic poetry, for example, depends on the possibility of locating an ‘original’ idea in a primary and stable context. Bloom’s analysis of male poets is rooted in Freud’s psychosexual paradigm of the Oedipal complex: his readings re-enact what he sees as the drama of the power struggle that occurs in the midst of poetic revisionism. The strength of the poet is born in that moment when he usurps the father-poet and annihilates the past with the weight of the present. Bloom’s formulation of the poetic intertext (although he does not use the term itself) proclaims a radical desire for discontinuity, for a break with what has gone before, and for a destruction of what has been of inspiration in it. His thesis is problematic for a number of reasons.

Firstly, his adherence to psychosexual familial relations suggests a more than metaphorical interpretation of literary relations, and his silence on the question of female authorship leaves us wondering at the implications of his study for a feminist account of heritage and influence. If we follow the Freudian paradigm, are we to assume that the female author retain a more ambivalent relationship to her mother and will thus...

19 Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein make this distinction clearly in their introduction to Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).
seek to affiliate herself with her literary precursors? This is certainly the approach taken by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who adopt the Bloomian model of anxiety into an exploration of 'the unique bonds that link women in what we might call the secret sisterhood of their literary subculture.' Their feminist genealogy assumes an entirely non-competitive, mutually supportive female lineage, in which the author 'actively seek[s] a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible'. (49) Such a celebratory approach to motherhood and relations between women in general is susceptible to biologically deterministic assumptions, as problematic in their literary as in their literal application.

Secondly, Bloom's thesis assumes a single, traceable poetic inspiration in the form of a shadowy father figure passing over the struggling poet as he strives to find his original voice. As a model of intertextuality, this is hardly tenable. Barthes, in his essay 'From Work to Text', describes the text as being woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?), antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony. The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas.22

Similarly, Derrida's theory of 'iterability' in 'Signature Event Context' (1982) suggests that every text is infinitely open since it is embedded in an anterior discourse; consequently, citation is fundamental to the act of communication itself.23

Thirdly, assuming that a father-figure can be identified at all in the new text, Bloom's model implies that a 'strong maker' (The Anxiety of Influence, 5) is formed in

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the act of destroying his inspiration, by way of overcoming and violating the literary past. This act of destruction, as Bloom sees it, does not take account of the delicate process of recontextualisation with which the intertextual effect is attained in the new text. According to Herman Meyer, far from necessitating any destructive act, it is precisely in sustaining the mark of the previous location whereby the citation gains status in the new text:

Im allgemeinen dürfte gelten, dass der Reiz des Zitats in einer eigenartigen Spannung zwischen Assimilation und Dissimulation besteht: es verbindet sich eng mit seiner neuen Umgebung, aber zugleich hebt es sich von ihr ab und lässt so eine andere Welt in die eigene Welt des Romans hineinleuchten.  

Meyer's understanding of 'traceable' intertextuality (although his work was carried out long before the term itself became part of critical currency) recognises the quality of recontextualisation that ensures freedom from a so-called anxiety of influence that does plague the purely derivative text. The tension deriving from the introduction of an earlier work into a new text arises out the dialectical force of a difference-in-similarity, without which the new text would be fated to disappear as a passive and aesthetically uninteresting imitation.

The delicate positioning of the intertext between the past and the present, the outside and the inside, is a critical factor in its effectiveness, and something that Bloom altogether neglects. It is the inherently dialectical quality of the intertext on which my own readings of texts will largely depend, and in which I see most clearly a different type of drama being acted out from that which Bloom envisions. The text is situated squarely between writer and reader, literally the 'text-between', and, as we have seen in this brief discussion of intertextuality above, in its openness and endlessly multiplying significations, always placed in an intertextual relationship to previous discourses and always received intertextually by present and future readers. I conceive of the textual

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‘drama’ as a complex combination of various dynamic elements, the nature of which I shall attempt briefly to sketch out below.

The intertextual aspect of the text, I suggest, focuses this interaction between author and reader particularly effectively. From the author’s point of view, any intertextual dimension acts both as a corroboration of the sovereignty of her/his text (anterior material being reintroduced as a controlled repertoire of effects) and a proclamation of its subjugation to that anterior material. For the reader, the intertextual dialectic compounds the position that s/he inevitably occupies in relation to the text. On the one hand s/he is in receipt of the text and subject to its effects, on the other positioned to disempower the authorial hand by re-locating the text in a new, readerly universe of signification. Certain intertexts receive assent by the text, whilst others are involuntary, attributable to a creative reception beyond the author’s sphere of influence: hence, the intertextual element of a work represents at one level a more articulate display of dialectically complex relations of power operative in the text. In the texts that form the basis of my study, I want to argue, there is in each case a critical field of force at the site of the intertext, and it is my intention, over the course of this work, to make explicit the extent to which the intertextual dimension exercises this force, and to discuss the possibilities that it confers on the text and on us, the reader. Before turning to the texts with which I am principally concerned in this study, I would like to set out some quite general points that seem to me pertinent as a basis for an examination of the role of intertext.

Firstly, we should distinguish between intertext that is deliberately re-collective, that is, identifiable as precisely traceable citation, and intertext that is identifiable, but less clearly defined, as anterior or exterior discourse that takes on ‘quotational’ force in the new text. The first, being located in a specific source, requires an author urgently to validate it as having currency in the work, and also comments on the reader's
competence in recognising it. The author places her-/himself in an oblique relationship to the text by introducing something identifiably external, and so knowingly thematises the potential or actual fragility of authorship. At the same time, the reader is placed in a particular position, finding her-/himself required to recognise the passage as intertext and then to locate its origin, in short to display her/his own erudition against that of the author. In the second instance, where the intertext is qualified in a much looser manner as a set of discursive associations that call attention to themselves in some manner as ‘other’ in the new text, it comes into play for the reader as a system of effects of which the author may or may not be aware. In either case, I would suggest that the intertext serves to articulate those processes of textual deliberation already at play in the text, because it is where the complex dialectic of power that marks the relationship between author and reader is most clearly operative.

Secondly, and following on from this, we might consider the part that the intertext plays in the formation of the terms of this relationship. How, and to what extent, does the intertext contribute to setting up or undermining a collaborative understanding between author and reader? If, as Peter Rabinowitz suggests (Rabinowitz, 30), we are to assume that the reader, at least initially, cannot avoid asking the basic question ‘what is the author saying?’, is the intertext instrumental in strengthening the desire to recognise and react ‘correctly’, and has the reader failed if s/he is unable to respond appropriately in these terms? Or, taking Judith Fetterley’s argument further, does the intertext allow for, even encourage, more resistance to or within a text? To give an example, let us consider Jelinek’s Krankheit oder moderne Frauen, in which the referential methodology consists largely in subverting and ridiculing historico-cultural precedents. Jelinek takes the patriarchal ‘Cogito, ergo sum’ and reformulates it into an ironic feminine aesthetic that calls attention to the culturally established conception of

the weaker sex: 'Ich bin krank, daher bin ich' (44) is the negative utopian vision of the
tightmarish vampire women who dominate the play. The intertext, easy to locate in this
case, relies for its effect on the audience's or reader's willingness to collaborate in the
joke made at the expense of the gendered mind/body distinction culturally established in
Western thought. The reader who recognises and then, for whatever reason, resists the
allusion might feel significantly more alienated from the author at this point: not only is
the author setting out a critical ideological framework of her own, but in summoning
and ridiculing a resonant tradition she is also coercing the reader into the political stance
required to appreciate the joke (and by implication the point) that is being made. The
intertext, then, can effect a heightened consciousness of the connection or disconnection
between author and reader.

The third point that I would like to set out as being pertinent to a study concerned
with the role of intertext has to do with the interruptive and disruptive quality of the
intertextual element in the text. Insofar as the intertext represents the focal point of
dialectical structures of power in the text, because it emphasises most dramatically the
text's position within the disparate activities of writing and reading, it might function as
some sort of rupture in the text, a point at which the reading map is constantly redrawn,
and where the reader as well as the author reaffirms or realigns her/his position in the
text. In particular the recognised specific intertext, because of its alien quality, demands
justifications and explanations that correspond to the dialectic inherent in it, such that
they extend beyond the usual interpretative framework within which the reader may
work. The urgency with which a reader desires to understand or question the author's
words is increased, since the deliberate inclusion of anterior material suggests a
particularly transparent affirmation of intent on the part of the author. Identification of
an author's sources is a consideration of influence, but the reader is as much party as

26 See Elizabeth Spelman, 'Women as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views', Feminist Studies, 8
(1982), 109-32.
witness to this: her/his apprehension of the intertext and its effect on the text gives much away as to the political and cultural influences that dictate her/his own readerly stance. Far from the intertext simply presenting the reader with the opportunity of observing the push and pull of influence on the author, it focuses the partiality of her/his own reading.

Finally, the system of reading and writing relations that the intertext sets up in the text, as outlined above, are of course bound up, as I have discussed, in events outside the text, in terms of experiences and influences occurring for author and reader which already place them in certain positions relative to the text and to each other. However, the relations cannot be understood outside the text in any sense, because they are first constructed at the point where the writing and reading subject coincide. It is the text itself that provides the site on which the various agencies confirm their existence by means of one another. The theoretical landscape in which we now move has sufficiently affected processes of writing to the extent that authors themselves are now writing knowingly into theories of discursive practice: authorial presence in the text has lost the possibility of an unreflexive relationship to itself. This increased recognition of the difference between the author of and the author in the text leads both author and reader to an extreme textual awareness of self and other which has obvious implications both for writing and for critical practice. Just as the reader has changed from a passive recipient into a situated, inconstant and active event, so too has the author's role as undifferentiated authorial voice increasingly been placed in doubt. The intertext, being the most visible point at which these observations come into focus, is therefore not just a corollary to more overtly thematic power structures in the text, but can serve as the site at which these significations find their force. That is, the drama of the text might be acted out by, rather than simply reflected in, the structure of the text. This is a huge resource, not just for the author writing expressly about power and its effects. It is also a point in writing which requires skilful manipulation if this resource is to be tapped by
the author seeking to engage his or her readership. The author who relies on an anterior text to lend authority to the new work risks alienating her/his reader if s/he does not work with the dialectical tension that the intertext summons into the new text.\textsuperscript{27}

It seems to me that the intertextual dimension of a text, whatever form it may take, represents a paradoxical force. Whilst it is rightly conceived in the same terms, and often in the same language, as a more general impetus towards multiplicity and heterogeneity that refutes all notions of a pre-existent authority, it is equally the case that questions of authority are always present, if implicitly, at the point where the intertext is manifested. It is a resonant space within which the reader can move: yet, at the same time, it cannot be unbound from the text and its effects on the reader. The texts I have selected as the basis of my study, however distinct in form and method, each seem to me to offer an insight into how a dynamic narrative space is created through intertextual devices that can be thought both to liberate and entrap the reader. I shall argue that in each, this space is where the texts’ respective thematic concerns find their greatest force. The sexual pathology in the foreground of \textit{Die Klavierspielerin} is expressed through the interplay of various currents of dominance and subservience between mother and daughter, teacher and pupil, male and female. The pornographic, psychoanalytic and musical intertexts form a discursive nexus of effects, an essentially ironic space where the reader is able to reflect critically on the power structures that Jelinek seeks to portray. In \textit{Ein weites Feld}, an old man comments on and polemics the political and cultural struggle resulting out of the reunification of the two Germanies. The invocation of Fontane and the apparently benign recollection of times

\textsuperscript{27} See my MPhil dissertation, "'Der Gang zu den Müttern': Re-collection as a Process of Identification in the Novels of Karin Struck" (unpublished master's thesis, University of Cambridge, 1997). In it, I argue that Struck’s claims to be writing a type of recollective literature specific to women is problematic, not only because it assumes and articulates the notion of a creative textuality that stems from a (biological) female capacity for closeness. The text that forms the centre of my critique is her \textit{Ingeborg B. Duell mit dem Spiegelbild} (Munich: Langen Müller, 1993), in which the figure of Bachmann is installed as the central device in a project to establish a feminine discourse of connectedness and identification. Struck relies on the reader to sympathise with a non-transformative referentiality that, I suggest, is fundamentally at odds with the intertextual principle as a whole.
past suggests a passionate and angry engagement with the present, whereby the text's impossibly broad historical and literary sweep brings the reader into confrontation with the tightly ordered political path to unity. Herta Müller's *Niederungen* explores the oppressive codes of village life, but is grafted in a prose that evokes nostalgia for that same culture, subverting its integrity. Finally, my reading of *Reisende auf einem Bein* focuses on Müller's use of a Calvino intertext: I analyse its role in the development of and response to a protagonist whose elusive quality reflects (on) thematic issues addressed by the text.

The texts, arising out of such politically and culturally diverse circumstances, require correspondingly differentiated approaches, and will serve only as examples of how one might productively engage with the theoretical issues that concern this study. Nevertheless, it is my hope that by attempting to respond to the following questions in respect of each text, my analysis might lead towards a more complete understanding of the interplay between text, intertext and reader. In what sense is the text considered ‘intertextual’? How is the intertext manifested in the narrative, and what form does it take? In what relation does it stand to the text as a whole, and how does it reflect and/or comment on the text's subject? Finally, does it give the reader space for reflection, response or resistance, and if so, can we analyse the precise nature of this space, the process of its formation, and the critical direction or scope it provides the reader?
Elfriede Jelinek’s *Die Klavierspielerin*

1. Narrative modes: referentiality and the generation of a critique

Elfriede Jelinek has always posed something of a problem for her home country: on the one hand, she has gained enviable international renown (and an array of literary awards in and outside Austria), especially since the publication of *Die Klavierspielerin* in 1983; yet, at the same time, this renown has been grafted out of an assault on an Austria whose existence many would prefer to deny altogether. Once and again, she has fouled her nest with visions of a society that is at best small-minded, conservative and profit motivated, at worst a direct heir to an ill-buried Fascist past. Awkward subject matter has always been grist to her satirical mill, and an obstacle to her acceptance on the home front. The scandalised response to the premiere of her parodic musical farce *Burgtheater* in Bonn in 1985, three years after its publication, was just the most open expression of a general hostility towards the author Jelinek that has often overridden considerations of the literary value of her work. Moreover, above and beyond the question of her perceived anti-Austrian stance, the specific thematic concerns that energise her texts, the all-pervasive violence, the insistently recurrent patterns of abuse depicted in relationships between husbands and wives, lovers, parents and children, and so on, lend a polemical force to her writing that invites controversy and affront. Given this, it is not surprising that her work has all too often been the object of critical attention that has not seen beyond the ‘shock factor’ with which it announces itself. Yet,

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29 See Allyson Fiddler, ‘Demythologizing the Austrian Heimat: Elfriede Jelinek as Nestbeschmutzer’, in *From High Priests to Desecrators: Contemporary Austrian Writers*, ed. by Moray McGowen and Ricarda Schmidt (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 25-44. Fiddler argues that Jelinek’s decision to use identifiable figures (the Wessely-Horbiger acting family) as a basis for her depiction of actors during the Third Reich, was what led to the play’s being interpreted as a Schlüsselstück, in other words, nothing more than an unprovoked and untimely attack on specific personages. Fiddler examines the scandal as a way of reflecting more generally upon Jelinek’s problematic relationship with her home public: she places her alongside Wolfgang Bauer, Thomas Bernhard and Peter Turrini firmly in that tradition of Nestbeschmutzung, yet at the same time considers the particular quality of Jelinek’s reception as one possibly marked by a rather more personal rejection of her politics, gender and ‘bad taste’ (p. 42).
at the same time, this element of antagonism is central to Jelinek’s methodology: the realisation of the effect, the import, of the texts depends absolutely on a violation of readerly expectation, an affront to our sensibility. The way that this strategy is realised will form the focus of my analysis of Die Klavierspielerin, a text that seems to me to exemplify the way that Jelinek’s critical assault gathers force.

Interpretations

In contrast to her earlier, more obviously experimental works, the substantial and nominally realistic plot and characterisation of Die Klavierspielerin, lending itself to psychological readings, made it immediately engaging. Its provocative vision of Vienna through a less than presentable lens, coupled with its obviously (and alluringly) autobiographical aspect, focused attention on an author who had clearly realised her influential potential as something of a revolutionary in a conservative environment. The critical world was shocked into recognising Jelinek’s polemic as no longer to be contained within any feminist or other restricting categorising framework. The text’s controversial nature is in part due to its unhesitating engagement with taboo subjects, especially its coupling of a female protagonist with the expression of masochistic sexual desire, and its replacement of the established model of woman as exhibitionist with that of woman as voyeur. The threefold female gaze of Jelinek, the author, Erika Kohut, her piano playing protagonist, and the narrator in an economy of desire that not only refers to but also directly situates the character in pornographic environments is consistent with Jelinek’s self-professed desire to create a pornography for women. Yet the question as to the status of apparently pornographic moments in the text is fundamental, inasmuch as pornography traditionally relies on an essentially unreflexive response for

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30 The first two published novels, wir sind lockvögel baby! (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1970) and Michael. Ein Jugendbuch für die Infantilgesellschaft (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1972), eschew conventional punctuation and plot development in favour of a non-sequential episodic structure, worked out of references to contemporary culture. Die Liebhaberinnen (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1975) is by comparison a realist novel, although it remains stylistically more proximate to these earlier works.
its effect. Here, all expression of desire is qualified in some way: the camera lens of the
narrative is smeared with the detritus of the city. Jelinek’s Vienna is an inhumane place,
driven by economics and not in the least redeemed by its weighty musical reputation.
The exploration of themes of subservience and dominance, masochism, self-harming
driven to their pathological limits in a character such as Erika, who is absolutely a
product of her bourgeois environment, means that the city and the country are more than
a coincidental backdrop to the events of the text. The story is crucially set in Vienna,
and relies on the specific atmosphere of the city for its unfolding. The most immediate
impression that the text gives is of a seemingly remorseless, undifferentiated attack on
everything in its field of vision. No-one and nothing is spared: the pitiful Erika, the
ghastly Kohut mother and the arrogant Walter Klemmer are a trio of unimaginable
horror, the music aficionados of Vienna are as sordid in their own way as the shady
characters that people the underworld of the city, and the unremitting unpleasantness of
each and every character we encounter on the street leaves us longing for some tiny
respite. Not surprisingly, initial reviews of *Die Klavierspielerin* were mixed but never
indifferent: one is given a remarkably clear sense of the critics searching for words
sufficiently visceral to articulate their response. For Benjamin Heinrichs, bowled over
by the force of Jelinek’s writing, ‘[d]as Buch ist auch eine Leserfolter; irgendwann wird
jeder es wegwerfen wollen, einen Haß bekommen auf den Haß, so glanzvoll der auch
formuliert sein mag, auf die unerschöpfliche misanthropische Beredsamkeit der
Autorin.’ Reinhard Beuth goes further: ‘die Jelinek schreibt lust-los, teilnahmslos. Sie
gefällt sich als Menschenverächterin. Sie haßt Musik, sie haßt Wien, sie haßt Menschen.

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31 Benjamin Heinrichs, ‘Mütterdämmerung: Frauen schreiben über die Mutter-Tochter Beziehung’, *Die
And she has, for all it, herself. That makes the Jelinek-reading so wearyingly.

She would simply bring her readers to hate.

With a text that, in its totality, invites such response, it is an onerous task to find a critical approach that does not 'domesticate' the Jelinekian vision in the process of analysis itself.

The text inhabits multiple discourses and hence lends itself to diverse readings, each of which can draw on rich seams of the text for their legitimation. A feminist reading can focus on the gendered structures of abuse that the text portrays, taking its lead from Jelinek's analysis of the male/female relationship as one that is necessarily exploitative. A psychoanalytic reading can be founded in the absent father and the mother/daughter dyad. A Marxist account of the text can look to its depiction of the economic one-upmanship that commodifies everything, even music, and holds the characters in a capitalist vice of mechanistic supply and demand. But none of these readings is on its own wholly satisfactory, not least because the discourses intersect with one another and militate against any single critical perspective. In this respect, whilst it is undoubtedly of use, indeed necessary, to focus on individual aspects of the text like the mother-daughter relationship, models of sadomasochism, or the Marxist account of power that informs the narrative, it is also imperative to consider the implications of how these elements of the text are bound together. Many studies of the text have tended to shy away from dealing with its complexities with thematically based interpretations that do not, to my mind, do justice to the polyvalent structural challenge offered by the narrative voice.


For example, Annegret Mahler-Bungers introduces her discussion of the text with
the assertion that 'was den Inhalt betrifft, ist dieses Buch eine ziemlich deutliche, aus-
gesprochene Krankengeschichte, an der sich die Psychogenese und Bedeutung des
Masochismus hervorragend studieren lassen', and her article centres accordingly on the
psychoanalytical significance of the absent father. Marlies Janz, taking issue with
Mahler-Bungers in her chapter on Die Klavierspielerin, is also indebted to
psychoanalytical theories of sexuality, and her radically different interpretation of the
text is located in the question of Jelinek's narrative methodology and stylistic
presentation of characters: '[s]o gewiss Mahler-Bungers recht hat mit der These, daß
Die Klavierspielerin im Grunde ein Roman ist über die Absenz des Vaters und die
damit verbundene Unfähigkeit der Tochter, ihr psychisches Geschlecht als 'Frau' zu
entwickeln [...], verbietet sich der Roman doch eben die Trauer um den verlorenen
Vater, und genau das wäre vielleicht der Ansatzpunkt für ein adäquate
psychoanalytische Interpretation [...]. Several critics approach the text by way of an
exploration of the particular dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship. Barbara
Kosta, for example, understands Erika through her 'Trennungsversuche', that is, her
paradigmatic and unrealised desire to separate from the oral mother and to widen the
field of experience. Allyson Fiddler discusses this dyad too: she suggests that it could
be seen to represent a classically psychoanalytic psychotic symbiotism, although her
analysis interrogates this position as well, questioning whether it is really possible to
read the text as a case study, given that Erika and her mother function textually as

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35 Marlies Janz, Elfriede Jelinek (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995), p. 86. I shall return at some length to these readings in part 2 of this chapter.
Rudolf Burger sees in the text an articulation of the dissolution of the individual, and following this thesis, doubts that it is meaningful at all to talk of psychology: ‘[m]an hat vom Entwicklungsroman gesprochen, man hat vom psychologischem Roman gesprochen. Es wird Zeit, vom soziologischen Roman zu sprechen. Er wird die literarische Form einer Gesellschaft sein, die das Individuum nicht mehr zerstört, weil sie es gar nicht erst entstehen lässt, seine Entwicklung schon im Keim erstickt oder frühzeitig abbricht.’

For Burger, a psychoanalytical reading is nonsensical, because rather than giving an explanation of the self (and its pathological potential in the face of ‘abnormal’ family relations) the text more accurately simply testifies to what Burger describes as the ‘Auflösung der Subjektivität’ (29) as the logical conclusion to capitalist society. As a Marxist, Jelinek neither implores her subjects to recognise their freedom nor aestheticises their alienation, but simply shows them as what they are, namely victim and executor of their own social relations. In other words, her work is simply a radically ideology-free representation of social relations as they are. Burger’s argument is taken up by Frank W. Young, whose analysis of the political and economic factors which conspire in the ‘Ich-Zerfall’ of the protagonist Erika attempts to redress the balance of critique, which he suggests has focused overly on the autobiographical aspect of the text.

Even the question of the text’s aesthetic and linguistic movement seems to be an arena for debate and disagreement among critics, a factor which is of particular interest to my study. Yasmin Hoffmann gives an excellent account of Jelinek’s use of language, considering the relationship between individual words and syntax. Taking up Jelinek’s own description of the words in her texts as ‘Wortkrüppel’, Hoffmann discusses her

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methodology in the following terms: ‘[s]ie sind Krüppel, weil sie Strukturen, also Skelette sind, die in einem hypertrophierten Verhältnis zum Signifikanten stehen, die eigentlich nur noch die Materialität des Signifikanten widerspiegeln, von einem zum anderen gleiten und durch das Gleiten Sinn erzeugen. Das heißt, der Sinn entsteht aus der Fortbewegung von einem Lautkörper zum anderen, entweder durch eine minimale metathetische Verschiebung oder mit anderen Mitteln der klassischen Rhetorik (Alliterationen, Assonanzen, etc.).’ 40 Whilst most critics agree on the text’s virtuosic rhetorical force, Ricarda Schmidt is dismissive, suggesting ‘daß Jelinek die dem Roman vorausgehende marxistische politökonomische Theorie durch eine kleine Zahl immer wieder neu durchgespielter rhetorischer Strategien in Szene setzt Erika Swales takes issue with Schmidt: she contends that it is precisely in the text’s rhetorical complexity, its ‘profusion of significances’, where we can locate the ‘critical self-interrogation’ that the text generates.42 Several critics besides Swales have noted the intertextual nature of *Die Klavierspielerin*.43 Within the context of the narrative, which follows a more conventional structure than Jelinek’s previous work, the text is not so obviously referential as a text like *Michael. Ein Jugendbuch für die Infantilgesellschaft*, which finds its inspiration in the modern mass media of television. Nevertheless it seems to me to be within the context of its broad intertextual sweep that the text can best be apprehended, not just in the process of identifying the many traceable intertexts

43 However, to my knowledge, only Michael Fischer has taken the intertext as the primary subject of an extended discussion of this particular text, in *Trivialmythen in Elfriede Jelineks Romanen ‘Die Liebhaberinnen’ und ‘Die Klavierspielerin’*, Saarbrücker Beiträge zur Literaturwissenschaft, 27 (St. Ingbert: Röhrig, 1991).
(like references to or quotation from specific authors) but also in the various discourses which inhabit and constitute the text. Like Swales, I disagree profoundly with Ricarda Schmidt on this issue, who says that 'Dialogizität oder Polyphonie im Sinne Bachtins gibt es bei Jelinek trotz des Perpektivewechsels beim Erzählen und trotz der vielen intertextuellen Versatzstücke von Hochkultur bis Trivialmythen nicht, weil die Worte aller anderen durch die eine Perspektive der allwissenden Erzählerin gleichermaßen satirisch entlarvt werden.' (Schmidt, 355) To my mind, these intertextual discourses, of pornography, most obviously, psychoanalysis, music, folklore, and so on, play a critical role in driving the narrative and our response to it. In them we find a proliferation of possible interpretations of the text, depending on our particular critical or personal concerns and the resulting emphasis we might lay on aspects of the text.

Over the course of my discussion, I hope to show that the particular quality of writing that Jelinek brings to the text does not necessarily preclude or privilege any one of these interpretations; indeed, its textualisation of many different and seemingly incompatible discourses into a coherent whole, with character and plot to boot, make it difficult to dispense with any of the discourses, or even to separate them into different strands, without losing something of the fabric, and hence the import, of the text. In its embrace of different discursive modes, the text attains a peculiar quotational quality, and I will seek to show how this quotation from the linguistic and perceptual world, an intertextual debt to the text's environment, is wielded in such a manner in the text as to be transformed into an apprehension and an understanding of that world and its mechanisms. In other words, the quotational mode in which the story is held is also the means by which it is given critical expression. I shall begin my discussion of the text with an analysis of the narrative voice, in order to give some indication of how I believe this quotational mode is arrived at, and to suggest something of its effect in the construction of a locus of critique in the text.
The position of the narrator

In any fictional text, the narrator, as the mediating voice, represents the main point of orientation for the reader as s/he negotiates the text. The choices that the author makes in configuring this voice, as a first or third person narrator, as a situated persona with defining characteristics (name, gender etc.), or as an omniscient, God-like figure apparently hovering above the text, and so on, are always closely aligned with issues of power and authority at work in the textual body, issues that I have discussed abstractly in my introduction. The manifold possibilities open to the author in the figure of the narrator, and the fundamental place that s/he occupies in the fictional text mean that the narrator can always be viewed, at one level, as the primary creative mouthpiece for the author and her/his most effective means of directing the reader. The reader, in this sense, can be thought of as being beholden to the narrator, looking to her/him for moral guidance and commentary on the characters, and being in receipt of a viewpoint to which s/he is expected to respond appropriately. This, broadly, is the way in which Wayne Booth conceives of the narrator in his seminal study, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*.44 Booth’s approach is based on an assumption that the fictional text should answer the need in the reader for a sense of security based on being able to discern the relationship between author and narrator: if the narrator represents an undesirable moral stance, this should be indicated by the establishment of distance between the implied author and the (now unreliable) narrator.

This approach runs into obvious difficulties when faced with a narrator like the one we find in *Die Klavierspielerin*, who is not so much unreliable as deeply ironic in nature. The question that arises with such a narrator is not so much ‘whether his beliefs and characteristics are shared by the author’ (*The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 151) as whether the reader is given the tools for a differentiated, cognitive response to the text by way of

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the narrative voice. In other words, can we understand the narrator as a device that, rather than govern the reader's response, is in place to offer a perspective and a more situated commentary on the characters and events? Ricarda Schmidt's assessment, cited above, of the way in which the intertextual strands of the text are crushed under 'der allwissenden Erzählerin' would seem to preclude any possibility of a dialogic relationship between narrator and reader. Following Schmidt's critique, the omniscient narrator, as a dictatorial, all-powerful figure, wields knowledge in such a way as to divest the text of its subtlety, and, we could assume, to bludgeon the reader into submission. Yet this evaluation, whilst rightly focusing on the critical issue of the relationship between knowledge and control, places the narrator above or outside the text as a disinterested voice, whereas it seems to me precisely in the role that she plays as a situated linguistic construct in the text where we can understand her impact. In the following discussion, I hope to demonstrate two things: firstly, that the figure of the narrator is brought to bear on the text as a radically ironic voice; and secondly, that it is this ironic voice that, by opening a resonant space in the text, facilitates a critical response. This critique, I shall contend, is achieved in the absence of a position of cognitive high ground, something that requires us to consider a third point: namely, if and how, given this, there is a place in the text where an ethical response can be entertained.

I would like to begin my analysis of the narrator by considering the manner in which the main character and her mother are introduced. From the outset, the narrative perspective is established as intensely versatile, consisting of numerous registers, inhabiting different discursive modes, and moving freely in and out of the protagonist's consciousness and along the plane of her life. It is quickly clear that the text exists at two, perfectly integrated, levels. On the one hand, there is a reality, namely the ghastly day-to-day existence of Erika Kohut in all its repetitive banality: the narrative relays this
story and depicts characters who one could, at a push, imagine moving through the same environment as oneself. On the other hand, this reality is always one that is refracted and to some extent distorted by language as an intervening force. This is not to say that language provides a bar to the effective representation of reality: on the contrary, it is, as Jelinek is so concerned to point out, only by manipulating language that a sense of reality is arrived at. In an interview, she sets out her aesthetic project in these terms:

Nicht die Wirklichkeit, wie es ist, weil man ja auch laut Brecht da immer nur so ein flaches Abziehbild der Wirklichkeit kriegt, sondern eine übertriebene, eine gebeugte Wirklichkeit. Sie also schärfer zu beleuchten und deshalb wirklicher zu machen – der Realismus ist halt auch ein wahnsinniges Problem.  

The ‘gebeugte Wirklichkeit’ of this text is displayed in a dazzling and highly self-conscious linguistic performance: whatever past and present facts and events we can glean from Erika’s life are mediated through devices which bring our attention as much to the narrator’s freedom to construct (and fragment) the plot as to the plot itself. It is the narrator who dictates the relationship of text to chronological time in Erika’s life, showing her now as a middle aged piano teacher, now as a baby, now as a petulant teenager. It is also the narrator who circumscribes the convention of the progressing plot with the static present tense, and who in so doing plays with literary notions of sequence and consequence. In language and textual organisation, the process of the child’s development to adulthood is effectively undercut: the constant present of the text together with the lack of progress in the central character creates a circular motion whose dynamic of enclosing claustrophobia, contrasting with its intertextual outward impetus, is a locus of narrative tension sustained right up to and beyond the anticlimactic finale.

Early on in the text, we are provided with a striking image of Erika and her mother:

Die Zeit vergeht, und wir vergehen in ihr. Unter einer glasernen Käseglocke sind sie miteinander eingeschlossen, Erika, ihre feinen Schutzhüllen, ihre Mama. Die Glocke läßt sich nur heben, wenn jemand von außen den Glasknopf oben ergreift und ihn in die Höhe

zieht. Erika ist ein Insekt in Bernstein, zeitlos, alterslos. Erika hat keine Geschichte und macht keine Geschichten. (15-6)

The narrator's obtrusive presence here effectively disrupts the nominal trappings of realism conveyed in the plot and characters in an announcement of the artificial status of the text. Erika and her mother have already been introduced to the reader in a conventionally realistic domestic setting. Here, in the 'Glasknopf', they are re-presented outside time and the recognisable perimeters of everyday life, yet at the same time the metaphor of the cheese cover is the absolute reality of their lives, an eloquent expression of its essential and static meaninglessness. Trapped in the metaphorical image, they are glued into the prose, while the narrator carries out a leisurely inspection and evaluation of their 'plight'. The reader, fully aligned with the controlling narrative perspective, is implicated in the metaphor too, placed in the role of objectifying observer in the ultimate expression of power-over: the scientist poring over his trapped specimen. Erika, we think, is beyond time, and since she makes no stories, not even deserving of anything so grand as any sort of fate, let alone salvation. Yet the narrative continues, and we continue reading: although we find no point of identification with the character, her story concerns us. Most importantly, the metaphor focuses the relationship we have with the text, for it makes manifest that we are in thrall not so much to Erika herself as to the language that describes her. It is a paradigmatic moment, demonstrating how the character is (almost literally here) exposed to us in a narrative voice in which we detect no trace of emotion, motivation or interpretation. Hence, whilst the narrator is, on the one hand, realised as a persona clearly privileged over Erika, on the other hand she is configured as a radically non-reflexive element, in a disconcerting mixture of the incarnate and the disincarnate. The fluidity with which the narrative voice moves within these poles has much to do with the stylised inhabitation of different discourses, by means of which the ironic mode becomes operative. This
quality of the narrative voice will be the main focus of the following analysis of the opening scene of the text.

**Reading I: Erika’s family life**

Erika’s ‘dramatic’ entrance is paradigmatic of the complex narrative perspective outlined above: it displays a typical combination of heavily ironic narrative control and *erlebte Rede*, where the characters come more definitively to the fore, apparently bypassing the narrator’s sardonic perspective. The scene is conveyed in a language that marries psychoanalytic discourse with moral fairytale models, with unsettling and above all comic effect. The narrator’s predominance is apparent in the opening lines of the text, when the mother’s own fond description of her daughter is pre-empted by the narrator’s simile: ‘[d]ie Klavierlehrerin Erika Kohut stürzt wie ein Wirbelsturm in die Wohnung, die sie mit ihrer Mutter teilt. Die Mutter nennt Erika gern ihren kleinen Wirbelwind, denn das Kind bewegt sich manchmal extrem geschwind.’ (5) Initially, the language is singsong, reminiscent of children’s rhymes (‘Wirbelwind [...] extrem geschwind’) and correspondingly inhabiting that axis of innocence and evil with which the *Märchen* genre gains its particular force. The *Märchen* model is a comically appropriate frame within which to place this particular ‘child’, for it deftly goes to the core of the relationship between Erika (who is nearing forty, we are told) and her presumably ageing mother, who is still given to calling her daughter by diminutive nicknames. As Erika tries to escape her mother’s clutches, a few lines down, the *Märchen* model is still strongly in force: ‘[d]och da steht schon die Mama groß davor und stellt Erika. [...] Die Mutter wartet noch, aber nur so lange, bis sie eins zwei drei gezählt hat.’ (5) The pantomime image of the looming mother takes its force directly

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46 Mahler-Bungers (pp. 82-3) compares the irritation aroused in the reader by this double image of Erika, as at once child and adult, with that effect produced by a dream in which the dreamer achieves an undifferentiated identity as both one and the other. She analyses this opening passage in psychoanalytic terms, understanding Erika’s duel identity as evidence of a pathology rooted in the fact that for her mother she signifies both phallus (because child) and partner (the replacement of her father).
from the 'big bad wolf' tradition of storytelling with its delicious mixture of comedy and danger. Family life is schematically presented and parodied in moral tones as a confrontation between the aberrant child and its finger-wagging mother. There is no need for a critical narrative metacommentary: their ludicrous relationship is perfectly and ironically captured in language. Our response depends on an awareness of the ironic potential inherent in the changing registers and perspectival shifts of the narrative, not through following the narrator, who never provides us with the security of a unilateral vision of her characters. It is left to us to decide, for example, how to respond to this vision of the mother and the values she represents: '[z]ur Rede und an die Wand, Inquisitor und Erschießungskommando in einer Person, in Staat und Familie einstimmig als Mutter anerkannt.' (5) The incongruence in our understanding of these two figures, the inquisitor and the mother, must be resolved in the space of a sentence. The mother's evaluation and justification of her rightful role as guardian not just of her daughter but of the moral standards of the Austrian people is only made ironic because of the relation in which it stands to the other narrative associations of the first half of the sentence and of the rest of the passage. The device of erlebte Rede gives the mother full rein, too, in condemning her daughter's frivolous purchase of a dress: '[m]an hätte dieses Kleid jederzeit in Gestalt eines Eintrags ins Sparbuch der Bausparkassen der österr. Sparkassen vor Augen haben können' (6), with the irresistibly comic effect rendered in the abbreviation. Likewise the observation: '[d]ieses Kleid wird nicht schon nächstes Jahr, sondern bereits nächsten Monat außerhalb jeglicher Mode stehen. Geld kommt nie aus der Mode.' (6)\(^7\) The bourgeois concerns of the mother manifest themselves in her compulsive need for and delight in possessions, something that also extends to Erika: '[w]o ist dieser quirlige Besitz jetzt schon wieder? In welchen Räumen

\(^7\) The final phrase is rendered intratextual a few pages later, in an advertisement for bonds. Critics and interviewers regularly draw attention to the perceived contradiction between Jelinek's Marxist critique of the system and her embrace of its mechanisms, her love of fashion, her use of the internet, etc. See for example Fiddler, 1994, p. 4; Swales, 2000, p. 437.
feigt er allein oder zu zwein herum?’ (7) In remaining faithful to the bourgeois sentiment and thus apparently quoting the mother, the narrative generates the force of its own ironic critique.

These many significations are grounded in a psychoanalytic model of the family as a triad of (absent) father, mother and child, pared down to parodic dimensions of the discourse it borrows from. Thus, Erika is ‘das Kind’ (the impersonal pronoun ‘es’ sits incongruously with her status as a middle-aged piano teacher) and her mother ‘könnte, was ihr Alter betrifft, leicht Eriks Grossmutter sein.’ (5) The demise of the father is presented so abruptly, and so perfectly represents the source of the present situation (expanded over the course of the next few pages to show Erika as the infantilised middle-aged child replacing the absent father in his role as bread-winner and bed-sharer), that it becomes a comic episode of the past, laying the ground for the description of the father’s being taken to a mental institution later in the text:


Later, we shall see that the father’s mental breakdown is gradual, and that he is shunted off only at some stage during her teenage years. But the schematised version of family life, which is grotesquely comic here, is typical of the way the narrator works to confront the reader with facts, while simultaneously refusing to assist her/him towards an appropriate emotional response, in this case to grief. The episode where the father is finally delivered to the institution is particularly effective in this respect: its satirical account of the journey and the place where the Kohut women will leave him provides an ethical perspective only in the form of its notable absence from the text:

The Märchen mode, interspersed with erlebte Rede that reads like a glossy brochure for the institution (‘[d]as Zimmer ist in Einzelbetten säuberlich unterteilt’ (96)) and euphemistic nursing jargon (‘ins Bett machen’; ‘personalintensiv’ (96)) contains a furious indictment of the system, yet the even narrative tone prohibits the expression of both grief and anger. And when the Kohut ladies are on their way home, a further voice enters the fray, that of their driver, a butcher who grotesquely analogises the event in the language of his own bloody profession: ‘[d]ie Damen K. gießen einen Schwall Innereien, noch dampfend, aus sich heraus, bestenfalls für Katzenfutter, beurteilt der Fachmann’. (98) The observation and the conversation that proceeds from it is especially effective in qualifying what has occurred because it is so utterly incommensurate both with the force of the theme itself and with the almost Swiftian momentum of the episode up to that point. Here, as so often, the reader is called upon to reinstate a critical perspective that is only ever implied by the ironic narrator and by the dissonance between what is said and what remains subterranean. This ironic dimension is a cognitive space beyond the narrative voice: it recalls to the text certain expectations and frames of reference based in the reader’s prior knowledge and understanding of the world, and makes the reader instrumental in realising its effects. In this respect, the reader confers meaning, but in so doing confirms the authority of the ironic text. Thus, the deployment of irony not only provides the all-important context in which a social critique is allowed to take shape: it also focuses the power structures at work in the text in a particularly transparent fashion.

Ironic effects: the social and textual structures of power

The episodes analysed above effectively demonstrate the complex role that irony plays in the text. On one level, irony is the main device that enables the reader to distance her-/himself from the characters and their actions, and accordingly to judge them. Yet this
distance is only a cognitive one: the ironic perspective never confirms a moral superiority in the reader, but rather plays on a moral awareness that excludes the objects of the irony in the text. One of the defining features of irony, as it has been theorised, is the way in which it joins the ironist and the intended interpreter by way of excluding the target of this irony, or the uncomprehending audience. Linda Hutcheon discusses this point at some length in her excellent study *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. Her thesis, largely explicated around the theme of texts concerned with Nazi Germany and World War II, develops the notion that irony ‘happens’ not so much by being written onto but by being read off the page, and this is how it becomes an essentially discursive strategy that is effective both textually and politically:

> With irony, there are [...] dynamic and plural relations among the text or utterance (and its context), the so-called ironist, the interpreter, and the circumstances surrounding the discursive situation; it is these that mess up neat theories of irony that see the task of the interpreter simply as one of decoding or reconstructing some “real” meaning [...], a meaning that is hidden, but deemed accessible, behind the stated one. If this were actually the case, irony’s politics would be much less contentious, I suspect. (11)

Hutcheon’s understanding of irony as a transactional strategy, rather than as simply a rhetorical device, is particularly pertinent in an analysis of *Die Klavierspielerin*, which, it seems to me, gains its very political force from the constellation of relations set up both inside the text (in the narrator’s ironic perspective on the characters) and outside it (in the mediation of this perspective to the reader). As Hutcheon says, ‘[b]ecause irony [...] happens in something called “discourse”, its semantic and syntactic dimensions cannot be considered separately from the social, historical and cultural aspects of its contexts of deployment and attribution. Issues of authority and power are encoded in that notion of “discourse” today in much the same way that, in earlier times, they were encoded in the word “rhetoric”.’ (17) She discusses the way that irony has usually been theorised as a hierarchical, because divisive device:

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In a negative sense, irony is said to play to **in-groups** that can be **elitist** and **exclusionary**. Irony clearly differentiates and thus potentially excludes: as most theories put it, there are those who “get” it and those who do not. [...] Images of voyeurism, sadism and [...] “victimization” proliferate in these discussions of the ironist as a kind of omniscient, omnipotent god-figure smiling down – with irony – upon the rest of us. (54)

Hutcheon’s thesis is very relevant to the question of how we read and react to Jelinek’s ironic narrator, from two intersecting perspectives, I would suggest. Firstly, the fairly obvious, and oft-iterated, idea of discursive communities which allow irony’s successful transmission from being ‘set up’ to being ‘got’, goes some way to explaining the way in which the narrator and the reader interact in this text. Jelinek’s irony is particularly disturbing in this respect because its target is so broad, to the extent that, as I have already suggested, even the discursive communities that are expected to ‘get’ the irony are not out of the firing line themselves. In other words, the unremittingly negative image we are given of every single character who features in the text means that it is not simply Erika and her little world that fills us with horror, but the world at large, the people in the street, regardless of age or situation. This approach rather undermines the reader’s complicity with the narrative voice, because its undifferentiated, wholesale critique unsettles the assumption that we are somehow superior beings to those who people the text. Perhaps we could feel ourselves above Erika and her mother, at liberty to judge them both, if they were isolated instances in a society that otherwise reflects in a recognisable form the moral or humane qualities that we might expect to find and that we assume in ourselves. As it is, everything is so polluted that there is no longer any real security offered to the reader in legitimising the line between these people and her-/himself. This is a disgusting society, the narrator seems to be saying, but it is our society too. Secondly, Hutcheon’s point concerning the manner in which irony is essentially semantic in nature seems to me to be the key to the way in which Jelinek’s deployment of irony, dependent as it is on undermining any sense of an alternative language to the one in the text, is so effective in its removal of
secure moral perches on which the reader can comfortably rest. The critique is formed out of the same language in which the characters themselves conduct their wretched lives, by pushing this language to its limits, but always, just, remaining within its confines. Of course, the humorous effects of such moments as Erika’s entry at the beginning of the text are brilliantly double-edged, because they reside not just in the narrator’s ability to articulate the characters’ disagreeable qualities in a critically dispassionate ironic framework, but also by the same token in the reader’s own capacity for heartlessness, for having fun at others’ expense. Are we really so different from these grotesque figures, after all? The narrator, using words and images to which we can relate, even if only on certain levels, ensnares us at every turn.

The profoundly unsympathetic narrator of Die Klavierspielerin thus complicates the reader’s search for an appropriate response to the text. Should we laugh at the characters? If we do, are we not ourselves guilty of buying into that same currency of inhumanity in which they are shown to trade? Should we feel disgust, or be affronted? Should we pity them? But what is there to pity in the narrator’s grotesque vision? The narrator’s stance provides no answer, refuses altogether to guide us through these numerous possibilities. In the Kohut flat, the struggle for control is grotesquely presented in the ritualistic, hair-pulling, and ludicrous physical struggles between mother and daughter; in the public domain, the dog-eat-dog mentality is even more apparent in the pared down, grotesque images of social interaction on the street. The image of power being exerted down a Darwinian hierarchy of strong to weak, weak to weaker is a recurrent and predominant pattern in the text, and the narrator finds endless ironic possibilities in the sheer pointlessness of this pattern. The satirical vision of the narrator in these scenes of violence recalls the pessimism of Wilhelm Busch and provokes the same grimly humorous response. As with Busch, the question arises as to what extent the presence of laughter in the face of such pessimism can constitute a form
of reconciliation with that pessimistic vision. Whilst the characters strive to assert themselves over their friends and families, the narrator bears witness to their violent, ritualistic routines, which themselves amply demonstrate that the characters’ efforts are all for nothing, because power is a cyclical thing whose only object, ultimately, is its own propagation. The men beat their wives, the women beat their children, and the process is endlessly repeated, since ‘das Kind lernt die Sprache der Gewalt’. (48) The narrator shows this cycle of violence, but also inhabits it, using the same language that the child is learning, dwelling on, exaggerating and dehumanising the images of hierarchy on the streets and in the homes of the characters. The ‘böse[r] Blick’ of the narrator itself bespeaks the same unspeakably mechanistic cruelty that divests the characters of their human(e) potential, allowing the abusive mother to hit her puppet-child (48), the husbands to beat their wives (48, 135), the murderers to leave the homes of old defenceless women taking with them the pitiful sums of petty cash that had been stashed under the mattresses (32-3) (we think of Max and Moritz and poor Witwe Bolte), and so on. Jelinek’s use of the grotesque in these scenes is not simply a technique to shock her readership into an apprehension of how these characters behave; it is also a fundamental part of her dialectical style, and perfectly illustrates the double edge of her writing, in that it exposes and undermines the status quo by re-inscribing rather than commenting on it. As grotesque writing, in other words, it refuses to entertain a fascination with violence while representing it. I would like to look in more detail at two scenes that may serve as examples of how the reader is required to respond to this gratuitous violence as it is textualised.

When the child Erika pretends to an unpleasant old woman that she does not know the way to a certain street for which the woman has asked directions, then gets off the tram and indicates to the woman that she has deliberately misled her, the narrative makes us into dispassionate observers, ensuring that we neither pity the old women nor
share in Erika’s satisfaction. The woman is one of ‘solche, [die] aus jedem Kunstwerk [...] noch den letzten Rest herauspressen [müssen]’ and ‘eine von den Leuten, die prinzipiell jeden Stein umwenden, ob vielleicht eine Schlange darunter ist’. (24) And Erika’s glee at successfully exercising power over the old woman is short-lived and anyway illusory, for she has forgotten ‘daß SIE in ein paar Minuten unter der heißen Flamme des mütterlichen Schneidbrenners zu einem Häufchen Asche verbrennen wird, weil sie zu spät nach Hause gekommen ist.’ (25) The characters exist on a hamster-wheel, and the narrator, exploiting the multiple ironic potential of their useless search for power, works within an identical matrix to model the hierarchical pattern of the characters’ lives and minds. The exaggerated process by which this unpleasant scene is manufactured in the sardonic and apparently amoral narrative voice is an effective means to explore Erika’s hypocrisy, and on a more general level, the grinding circularity of a self-serving society driven by the desire to exert power over all who are weaker than oneself.

In the second example, when a mother is shown hitting her child, the narrator mediates the scene in a visual aesthetic that dehumanises not only the mother, but the child as well:

Der Kopf einer etwa Vierjährigen wird von einer mütterlichen Orkanwatsche in das Genick zurückgeworfen und rotiert einen Augenblick hilflos wie ein Stehaufmännchen, das sein Gleichgewicht verloren und daher größte Mühe hat, wieder in den Stand zu kommen. Endlich steht der Kinderkopf wieder senkrecht wo er hingehört und gibt schauerliche Laute von sich, worauf er von der ungeduldigen Frau sogleich wieder aus der Lotrechten befördert wird. (48)

After this visually shocking image, the narrator stresses not the cruelty of the mother, but the practical difficulties posed for her in abusing her child whilst juggling her shopping bags:

Sie, die Frau, hat schwere Taschen zu tragen und sähe dieses Kind am liebsten in einem Kanalgitter verschwinden. Damit sie die Kleine malträtieren kann, muß sie nämlich jedes Mal vorübergehend die schweren Taschen auf dem Boden abstellen, und das ergibt einen zusätzlichen Arbeitsgang. Aber die kleine Mühe scheint es ihr wert zu sein. (48)
And in the final image of them, the critical epithet is attached to the child, not the adult:
'[d]och bald fallen die Frau und das laute Kind hinter Erika zurück.' (48) The scene sets up a grotesque, farcical version of the mother/child image, using a language whose mechanical nature shows the social conditions that support and perpetuate this language of violence.49 The ironic potential happens (to return to Hutcheon’s expression) through the reader recognising the inappropriate narrative emphasis on the mother’s difficulties in divesting herself of her shopping in order to manoeuvre herself into a suitable position to mete out the abuse to her child.

What is arrived at in these moments is a representation of a set of prevalent social conditions that are just recognisably ‘real’, peopled by character types (the bitter old dame, the abusive mother, the explosively frustrated teenager) who ring true on a two-dimensional level, but who, within the tightly controlled narrative gaze, are never granted the fictional illusion of textual self-determination. Hence, the reader is not required to invest in the characters, but in the social, essentially discursive, factors that frame their day-to-day lives. Jelinek has commented that '[w]as mich [...] von vielen Autoren unterscheidet, ist, daß bei mir keine Menschen agieren' (Sauter, 113), and this observation can be taken as an expression both of her understanding of social mechanisms and of the way that these mechanisms are represented textually. The narrative frames the hopeless circularity of its subjects in language that remains critically anchored in the ugly reality that it exposes. Its transcendence of that reality is aesthetic in nature, and is realised by way of its inhabitation of the borders of a ‘gebeugte Wirklichkeit’, to return to Jelinek’s expression, where reality is pushed into the realm of the grotesque. The reader is relied upon to consolidate the critique into a more cognitive awareness of the dysfunctional modes of living enacted by the

49 Yasmin Hoffmann (1999) considers the way language and the narrative perspective combine in this scene to effect ‘die Störung eines Gleichgewichts’ which is ‘keine im moralisch verwerflichen Sinne gestörte Machtbalance […] sondern ein mechanisch gestörtes Gleichgewicht, in dem leblose Elemente aus der Senkrechten und Lotrechten geraten sind.’ (p. 16)
characters. For the reader, in turn, the motivation for this is to be found in the proximity of the images to the ‘truth’, whatever this may be, and however warped it is seen to be. One of the main points to which we return again and again in Jelinek, and which this thesis is particularly concerned to explore, is the nature of this reality, and how concepts such as truth and reality gain status at all in a text which, we have seen, eschews making statements or judgements of an absolute nature. If the text represents a critique, which it surely does, where then does the reader find a foothold in the text from which to turn the ironic voice into something more solidly critical? I want to end this chapter with a close reading of a passage that might offer something by way of an answer to this question.

Reading II: Erika in society

The short passage I am concerned with (58-61) forms an interlude between two longer scenes which show Erika in the very different environments of pornography, in the form of a seedy peep show, on the one hand, and music, a private evening concert of chamber music in which Erika takes the starring role, on the other. These violently opposing worlds, the dark and light sides of the Viennese cultural coin, are also constitutive of Erika’s schizophrenic lifestyle as a whole, and the two passages, each of which describes in detail an evening, complement each other at entirely opposite ends of the scale of respectability. The apparently vast space that Erika must cover in her journey from one scene to the other is considerably reduced in the presentation of each of these environments as an institution of (notional) pleasure deriving from performance. The textual link between them is achieved in the form of a flashback to a scene in Erika’s teenage years. In this short passage, the notion of the performative, already shown to be a governing principle of the sex and music industries, is explored as an altogether more fundamental concept, namely as something determining (because constitutive of) identity per se. In my analysis of this passage, I shall attempt to show that the
representation of Erika as a teenager here does not simply provide a focal point, a site of origin, for the scenes preceding and following on from it (although it does this also). The particular nature of this representation takes the form of a reproduction of a certain (and very specific) reality that, crucially in language, is both brought into focus and cast into doubt. The linguistic dexterity of the passage has a critical function in addition to an aesthetic one, creating a distance between Erika and the narrator which facilitates, but never expressly formulates, a judgement. In my analysis of the narrative techniques in this passage, I shall explore the ironic mode which the narrator inhabits and through which the reader must negotiate his or her approach to the figure of Erika. I hope thereby to give an insight into Jelinek’s use of language as a critique of Erika’s world as well as a means of communicating it to her reader.

The scene itself is a thematically revealing snapshot of the young Erika and her experience of the ever-widening gulf between herself and the ‘normal’ girls doing ‘normal’ things around her. Symptomatic elements of pathological behaviour are already coming to maturation in the protagonist as she struggles to come to terms with herself in relation to her well-adjusted contemporaries. But the nature of her pathology is presented not so much as a label which can be attached to her to distinguish her from ‘the normal’ (the girls, the society, and, by implication, us, the reader), but as an, albeit grotesquely exaggerated, symptom of the pathological world of which she is part. If she is pathological, it is because of, not in contrast to, her world, and she is as representative of that world as the girls around her. This is not to say that she is average, for her behaviour clearly sets her apart from the other teenagers (and likewise later from her adult peers) in her own awareness of her ‘exceptionality’ and our less flattering perception of her oddity. The scene, foregrounding Erika’s difference, attends to the ways in which pathology is constituted socially and interpreted psychologically. Erika is
thus a logical conclusion to a pathological world, not a pathological aberration from a normal world.

The use of capital letters for pronouns is a technique common to each of the four passages in which Erika is depicted as a teenager. The awkward disruption to the text which they cause reflects the crisis of self-awareness which characterises Erika, and which leads her, in a later passage, to decide that ‘niemandem wird sie sich bis zum letzten und äussersten Rand ihres Ichs, bis zum letzten Rest in die Hand zählen!’ (86) In this passage, Erika’s concern to define herself is shown to be her overriding preoccupation, but at the same time the narrator undermines the specificity of her character and its possibilities, ironising her pretensions to individuality. As Erika watches the other girls, who are specified no further than ‘Gestalten IHRES Alters’ (58) and a few lines below as ‘die jungen Silhouetten’, chatting in an ice cream bar, the narrator offers a perspective on the difference Erika perceives between (the individual) her, on the one hand, and the (collective) others, on the other:

Nur davon, dass SIE es betrachtet, wird IHR Gesicht schon abfällig. SIE hält ihr Gefühl für einmalig, wenn sie einen Baum betrachtet, sie sieht ein wunderbares Universum in einem Tannenzapfen. Mit einem kleinen Hammer klopft sie die Wirklichkeit ab, eine eifrige Zahnärztin der Sprache; simple Fichtenwipfel türmen sich ihr zu einsamen Schneegipfeln. (59)

Erika sets her own poetic imagination as a weapon against the prosaic activities of the girls eating ice cream in the ‘schönen Ruhe der Gewohnheit’ (58); her isolation, the narrator suggests, is explained as being born out of her enhanced sensibility, her proximity to the ‘Giganten der Tonkunst und die Giganten der Dichtkunst’ (59) that trundle by in the wake of the revelation of her singularity. However, it is the narrator, not Erika, who is able fully to examine the poetic potential of language in this passage, and in so doing enables the limitation of Erika’s seemingly poetic vision to be exposed.

The other three scenes can be found on pp. 16-24 (in the tram), pp. 35-45 (in the family’s house in Styria), pp. 82-90 (the unintended clitoridectomy). The only reference to the technique at any other point in the narrative occurs when Klemmer, reading the masochistic demands that Erika has set out in a letter to him, ‘schlägt sich schmerzhaf tet Scherz auf die Schenkel, dass sie IHM Anweisungen erteilen möchte!’ (p. 218) In this case, the implications of the upper case are clearly different.
The dialectical relationship between Erika and the narrator, forged in the poetry which is ironically occasioned (in the narrative) by the exposure of this limited vision (in the protagonist), is particularly clear at moments where the narrative is focused specifically on language as a thing in its own right, rather than just a tool of communication. Here, for example, language is held up to the light as one of the means by which Erika distinguishes herself from her peers: whilst they chat inconsequentially over their forgotten ices, she is engaged in examining the nature of reality itself! Meanwhile the narrator, sketching out the space between herself and Erika in the comment that ‘SIE hält ihr Gefühl für einmalig’ (59), is entirely constant in the abundantly poetic vision that she exerts on the text, creating, paradoxically, poetry out of the limited vision of her main character. Thereby she brings Erika’s pretensions to our attention, whilst never actually judging or commenting on them. Typically here, the critique, entrusted ultimately to the reader’s inference of irony in the narrative voice, is immanent to the text. The gap that Erika sketches out between herself and her peers is simultaneously redrawn by the narrator as a gap between her self-perception and our (that is, the reader’s) perception of her as self-deceived about her originality and her exceptionality.

It is this dialectic, whereby the stifling of creativity in the course of its expression liberates creativity, which sustains the energy of the passage and characterises the ironic mode at play in the text as a whole. How can Erika know that the proof of her uniqueness, the imagery produced to lay claim to her superior poetic sensibility, is in itself somewhat less than exceptional? If we are uncharitable, the ‘wunderbares Universum’ (59) that she divines in the shapes of the treetops is less evidence of a fervent imagination than of a fairly typical reaction to a beautiful sight, her eulogy just one more hackneyed postcard image of a snowy Austrian winter. The poetic genius is reconceived as something learnt, something strangely unaligned with the freedom associated with those linguistic flights of the imagination that Erika claims for herself.
Thus, the ‘wonderful’ images conjured up by the sight of fir trees are arrived at with the figurative aid of a little hammer, and a dentist’s training and precision. Equally incongruously, music and art, usually viewed as the apotheosis of individual expression and creativity, are here represented metaphorically by means of an image of lumbering tanks camouflaged as if in war, culture as the rumbling engines of the bourgeois lifestyle. It is therefore quite understandable that Erika’s response to them should be scientifically programmed as information which she has been taught by others, not intuited by herself: ‘[i]n paar hunderttausend Informationen zucken durch ihr darauf dressiertes Gehirn, ein wahnsinniger wie betrunkener Rauchpilz wabert sekundenschnell hoch, setzt sich in einem aschegrauen Akt des sich Übergebens langsam wieder zu Boden.’ (59) The metaphor, culminating in the image of the atomic bomb (which has been reproduced so much that it is already almost a symbol in itself of the lost innocence of twentieth-century Faustian man), becomes grotesque, a timeworn cliché, when applied to this self-obsessed teenage girl. Thus the poetry that drives the narrative forward with such extraordinary energy in this linguistic tour de force at the same time effectively disassociates itself altogether from Erika.

The reproduction of images such as these, the proliferation of metaphor which is at the same time often deliberately inappropriate to, or at odds with, the ‘reality’ it represents, gives a clue as to the manner in which language is wielded as a self-conscious artifice in the text. But language is not manipulated, made strange, for its own sake: rather, the complex rhetoric of the passage questions the ease with which we suppose there to be a pre-existent reality at all. In the reproduction of Erika’s perceived reality, that reality itself gains the appearance of a reflection, where natural movements, patterns of speech and habit, even music, are shown to be cogs of a culture machine unquestioningly reproducing itself and its limitations. When Erika takes a hammer to reality, the text expressively performs the idea that ultimately, even reality itself is a
metaphor, rendered by and so subordinate to language. Language thus both describes and prescribes its subject, and the narrative mode articulates this issue, on the one hand seeming to reproduce reality through language, and on the other to demonstrate its constitution through language. In order to unmask Erika's fantasies, the reader must claim to know a thing called reality (and its deployment of absolute terms such as normal and pathological) yet reality and language are bound so tightly together that our assumption of Erika as a pathological being is never given confirmation.

What is confirmed, though, in this tension between language as reproduction and production, is the role of repetition and convention in conferring authority on categories of 'truth', especially as they are related to identity formation. The role of performance, which plays such a defining role in the narrative as a whole (we have seen that the two scenes for which this passage provides the bridge pivot, respectively, on the performance of a peep-show girl and a pianist), becomes in this short passage a metaphor for the futility of Erika's quest for her own distinct self. This is, in many ways, a textual enactment of the arguments that Judith Butler sets out in her challenge to what she sees as the normative categorisation of gender and sex, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. In her consideration of the political implications of cross-dressing, Butler echoes Nietzsche's assertion that the world is structured through metaphor and ultimately through performance and illusion, because it is impossible to separate the 'thing' itself from its position in language and in 'thought', that is, the 'word' and the associations, political or otherwise, that we bring to bear on it. Nietzsche's description of truth as '[e]in bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen, kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen [...] die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, dass sie welche sind' is for Butler clearly a physical, as well as a philosophical explanation of categories

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of truth. Butler suggests that linguistic and gestural repetition (the things we customarily say, the clothes we choose to wear, the mannerisms we adopt or are taught, and the way in which we shape our bodies to conform to social expectations) are the fragile and contingent foundation for identity, on which the unified subject is epistemologically imposed:

> [A]cts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the “integrity” of the subject. (136)

Butler’s analysis of the arbitrary nature of ‘normality’, as a set of gendered conventions to be (heterosexually) followed or (homosexually) rejected in making up the – fictional – human subject, is enshrined in Jelinek’s description of the girls in the ice cream salon and the illusory measuring stick they provide for Erika to circumscribe her own (‘abnormal’ or ‘exceptional’) identity. In such a culture, nature and the natural world no longer have any meaning independent of their cultural evaluation; in this culture, Art has claimed victory over Life. The importance given to the application of make-up in the passage is, on one level, suggestive of the condition of femininity from which Erika is excluded. However, in the context of Erika’s obsessive desire for self-definition, it also explores a more ontological concern with the nature of the emergent self’s dependence on cultural norms. Here, artifice subsumes the ‘natural’:

> Eine Kette aus Kunstwimper wird auf Naturwimpern geklebt. Tränen fließen. Ein Brauenbogen wird heftig ausgemalt. Derselbe Brauenstift macht einen schwarzen Punkt auf ein Muttermal dicht beim Kinn. (60)

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52 Friedrich Nietzsche, Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn, in Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke, ed. by Karl Schlechta, 3 vols (Munich: Karl Hanser, 1956), III, 314.
The signs of femininity emerge out of the affinity with such artifice, the lipstick, the face powder, the imitation mother of pearl hair-clip, the tightly knotted hairstyles, and it is these that now signify natural womanhood. The ‘weibliche Art’ (60) that springs out of the girls’ bodies is formulated as a masquerade, in an essentially performative appearance remote from the ‘saubere[n] kleine[n] Bäche[n]’ (60) to which it is compared. The incongruity of the plastic hair clip fixing the ‘Aufsteckfrisur’ (60) with the natural image of the rivulets is amusing, but it also hints at a more profound concern, evident throughout the narrative, with the status, and indeed possibility, of originality in a culture where everything, music included, becomes reproduction and cliché. The description of the girls and their make-up may be occasioned by Erika’s memory (and her overriding sense of her ‘otherness’ from these teenagers), and in its attention and detail it captures the obsessive quality of practised artlessness that goes with the female teenage territory it observes. And yet in itself, the reproduction of the images is exuberantly, creatively attentive to detail, focusing on the handle of the comb shoved into the lacquered hair, re-adjusting the haystack. Once more, Erika’s restricted mind is refracted by the narrator, yielding a magnificent piece of rhetoric.

This same creative energy attends the description of Erika’s own (musical) performance, and implicitly brackets her in the same cultural bind as the girls she believes her musical achievements differentiate her from. So, just as the girls are identifiable as girls because they are ‘vertraut mit weiblichen Bewegungen’ (60), namely of conforming to those ‘feminine’ postures which are performatively expected of them, so also Erika’s music is configured as a series of endlessly repeated circus tricks, where Erika is the circus animal who performs them:

Ein müder Delphin ist SIE, lustlos zum Endkunststück ansetzend. Schon erschöpft den lächerlichen bunten Ball ins Auge fassend, den das Tier in alter Routinebewegung sich auf die Schnauze schupft. Es holt tief Atem und versetzt sein Gerät in kreiselige Bewegung. (60)
In the image of the weary dolphin masquerading as a musician, as in the image of the girls performing their gender, the text suggests that it is convention, rather than some sort of pre-existent reality, which is the precondition for self-definition. But her claim to individuality and hence to superiority, largely grounded in the artistic (and specifically musical) sensibility she professes to bring to bear on her environment, is constantly brought into tension with the narrative voice, where music is shown to be just as culturally inscribed as make-up and so much else. The descriptions of Erika’s own performance do not correspond in the slightest to her self-image. Rather, they call attention to the manner in which even music, thought to be the key to the expression and liberation of the soul, becomes, when used in this manner (namely, as one more commodity wielded in pursuit of self-advancement and individualisation) nothing more than a tired imitation of itself. Erika’s desire, in her music, to ‘[e]mporfliegen [...] zum Exotischen, zum Sinnebetäubenden, zum den Verstand Sprengenden’ (61) is unfulfilled; instead, under the strict tutelage of her mother, she suffers from something more along the lines of repetitive strain injury: ‘IHRE steifkrallige linke Hand, gelähmt in unheilbarer Ungeschicklichkeit, kratzt schwach an etlichen Tasten.’ (61) The proximity of these two strikingly different images in the narrative is a forceful reminder of the double-edged nature of music, bespeaking an awkward cohabitation of profound expressivity on the one hand and utter socialisation (especially in the Viennese environment) on the other. Music, like make-up, promises transcendence in its drudgery, and yet Erika’s world, like that of her contemporaries, is one in which the banal always conquers desire.

In the heavily ironic mode which is effected in the combination of the banal as subject (the girls eating their ice cream, the teenager Erika repeating her Brahms over and over) with the complexity of poetic imagination that transforms these conventional scenes into rich, often even linguistically overcrowded images, a tension is created with
which the reader is forced to engage. This tension is established straight away, with the
description of the girls in the ice cream bar:

Es brausen Ströme von Neonlicht in Eiseskälte durch Eissalons, durch Tanzhallen. Es
hängen Trauben von summendem Licht an Peitschenmasten über Minigolfanlagen. Ein
flimmernder Kaldestrom. Gestalten IHRES Alters lagern in der schönen Ruhe der
Gewohnheit vor Nierentischen mit gläsernen Kelchen, in denen lange Löffel wippen,

The idle non-event itself engenders a passage of extraordinary linguistic energy: the
abstract force of ‘[e]s brausen […] Es hängen’ and the lack of main verbs subsumes the
activities of the girls under the physical presence of the environment itself, the hums
and flickers, the cold air and surfaces of the bar, the colours of the ice cream. The
predominantly visual narrative introduces a passage that resembles a film, but one that
has been made in the reproduction of images through language, not through the camera.
The narrative returns us to Erika’s teenage years only by way of the images that
confront us: the ‘Gestalten IHRES Alters’ momentarily confuse, until we have
established the backward movement of time. And yet the scene is not a flashback in the
conventional sense, that is, it does not function to confirm a character’s psychological
development, neither does it refer to past events as they relate to the present nor
thematise the process of recollection. Rather, it brings the past narratively into the
present, and so disrupts the conventional association between development and passing
time. The odour of stagnancy is especially strong during this and the other flashbacks to
Erika’s teenage years; just as ‘[d]ie Gabel ist eine Gabel. Das Messer ist ein Messer’
(60), so Erika, with all her pretensions, is unmistakably Erika, whether she is sixteen or
thirty-six. The use of the present tense, used throughout the narrative, supplies the
characters with the grammatical support of an eternal now that is fully aligned with their
eternally looping lives. The present tense, especially when lent to an intensely visual
scene such as this one, gives it the status of a timeless dream, with a dream’s typical
combination of the imprecise, faceless, indescribable (the girls are ‘Gestalten’, ‘jungen
Silhouetten (58), the entities of music and art are 'unkenntliche sehr grosse Maschinen' (59)) with the detailed (the colours and flavours of the ice creams, the pistons and capillary tubes of the machines). Just as in a film, images such as these are both immediate and unfixable for the viewer, so in this passage they dissolve the exigencies of time and place, placing the reader in a narrative limbo which, perhaps paradoxically (given the freedom suggested in this structure), exactly describes the undifferentiated and regulated pattern of Erika's life. This pattern is one characterised precisely by constraint and repetition, so that regardless of when we press pause, as it were, the same scenes are playing out. The devastating finale to the previous scene, where Erika returns innocently home from her peep-show excursion, is not simply highly amusing ('[d]as Kind hat heute richtige rote Backen, was die Mutter freut. Hoffentlich rühren diese Rotbacken nicht von einer fiebrigen Erkrankung her' (58)); it also introduces the flashback as part of the continuum on which Erika performs her miserable life over and over again, suspended agelessly, as the narrator says, 'dieser Fisch im Fruchtwasser der Mutter'. (58)

In the overwhelmingly visual environment out of which the scene is so self-consciously constructed, the narrator provides us with little access to the mind of her protagonist. Instead, those structures of teenage angst and isolation that circumscribe her feelings and emotions are displaced onto images that represent them, such as Erika's clawed hand, the mounds of rubbish, the screeching recorders. Here, as generally, the narrative is almost devoid of stream of consciousness techniques which might give Erika more psychological plasticity. Her thought processes, such as they are, are represented in figures of speech (metaphors, colours, materials, etc.) that effectively deprive her of individuated psychology. In a sentence such as '[u]nermeßlich breit schleppst sich der Müll zwischen IHR und DEN ANDEREN dahin' (59), the sense of isolation is conveyed in poised and crafted language as an aesthetic which is
deliberately at odds with the raw immediacy that it supposedly represents. As often elsewhere in the text, the tone adopted by the narrator is ironically inappropriate to the scene, and the reader, I would suggest, is unsettled by the ironic edge that the narrator’s choice of register lends to the passage. At one point, there is an overt reference to the scene in the film *Un chien andalou* that depicts two grand pianos, stuffed with donkeys, being dragged across a room. This image of ‘halbverweste, blutschwere Häupter, auf die Tasten niederhängend. Tot. Verrottet. Außerhalb von allem’ (60) is an inevitable backdrop to our vision of Erika at the end of the passage as ‘[b]leiernes totes Gewicht’ (61) leaning over the keyboard. The proliferation of images and perspectives in the passage pays a debt to the arbitrary Surrealist games played in *Un chien andalou*, and has a similarly disconcerting effect. In this way, the reference holds a mirror to the complex methodology of the passage, a collection of disparate fields of vision, held in exuberant ironic relation to one another and so quoting from but never succumbing to (our) pre-existing notions of that particular state of being a teenager. The passage seems to me paradigmatic of Jelinek’s deployment of referential ironic modes as an alternative to psychological explanation, and paradigmatic also of the way in which the reader comes to be involved and implicated in the narrative, not emotionally, but critically.

It has been my intention in the first part of my discussion of *Die Klavierspielerin* to bring to attention those complex narrative modes operative in the text, and to suggest how the particular use of language performs a critical function in constructing Erika’s story for its reader. I have tried to show how the reader is unsettled by the narrator’s refusal to provide reference points, but also suggested how a critical, cognitive awareness is gained through the one constant factor in the passage and in the text: the ironic stance itself, and the corresponding space that is granted to the reader to respond in a manner that is differentiated from the processes recorded by the narrative. It seems

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to me that only in this ironic space can we find some sort of answer to the urgent question of how we, as beings trapped in precisely the same socially determined mechanisms as Erika herself, and in particular having no recourse to any other knowledge besides that radically constructed one demonstrated in the language of the text, nevertheless enjoy a critically advantageous awareness over the characters. It seems to me that this space is the only identifiable place where an 'ethical' response is entertained, and where we find the tools not to conform to this radically pessimistic vision articulated over and over again in the text. In other words, it is here where language, recording what it sees, also facilitates reflection and hence relief.

In my analysis of the narrative voice, I have attempted to describe the way in which the ironic mode that fundamentally defines the text presupposes a textual duplicity, relying as it does on a double focus on what is said and what is not said. I have suggested how Jelinek’s writing here achieves a particular kind of quotational narrative force, with exaggerated ironic detail and kaleidoscopic perspective lending the narrative a characteristic hyper-reality. The discursive patterns we find in *Die Klavierspielerin* are intertextual in the sense that the narrative recalls a range of pre-established discourses, quoting from a staple repertoire of received ideas and images: about the home and family, about love, about the highs (music) and lows (sex) of the culture industry, and so on. What intertextuality as part of an ironic constellation does is to bring quotational narrative modes into generic focus, whereby characters and events are as it were spoken by certain kinds of pre-existent text. At the same time, there are a number of specific traceable (musical and literary) intertexts that further interrupt the nominally conventional narrative line and re-house it in different environments. It seems to me that only by hearing all at once the multiple intertextual voices that cut across each other, splicing and fusing the narrative, can we fully appreciate the text. Therefore I intend, in the following, to investigate the nexus of effects that the various discourses bring to
bear as inflections of each other, not as isolated instances. These intertextual effects, I shall argue, engender in the reader a peculiar mixture of compulsive involvement in and alienation from the text, a response that is critical to its effectiveness.
2. The intertextual nexus of desire

The trajectory of the intertext begins with the identification of the explicitly pornographic female authorial and narrative voice and ends with the autobiographical Erika/Elfriede game, via a quasi-psychoanalytical configuring of its subjects. The pornographic intertext is the predominant one, in the sense of being the primary medium for the expression of sexual desire and fantasy in its various manifestations. Its status as intertext is, though, conditional on those other intertexts through which it is articulated. Thus, whilst the text confronts and plays with the whole spectrum of typically pornographic images and language, these are not translated into vehicles for titillation as such, because of the way in which they are framed in other discourses. During the course of the following discussion, I shall explore how a reader might respond dialectically to a pornographic intertext that constantly both confirms and rejects its own stated desire, and show how it is a pattern that we can perhaps use as a metaphor for understanding the complex processes of subjugation to and appropriation of an intertextual text.

The pornography debate

Jelinek’s work has often been described by critics as pornographic in nature, both generally and in discussion of particular explicit scenes in her texts. It would seem pertinent, given this, to begin with a clearer idea of the margins that serve to define what pornography actually is. As the significant volume of literature written on the subject would confirm, the huge pornography industry has generated much academic debate, particularly on the feminist circuit. This debate seems to have been characterised predominantly by heavily value-laden and correspondingly fraught interpretations of pornography and the issues surrounding it, in the face of its principal defining quality, namely its non-reflexive address to its intended audience. I am therefore immediately
cautious about my own use of the term in a literary context and especially concerned to analyse more precisely the point at which a text could be thought to become pornographic in nature. The question of what makes a text pornographic, or what makes any material pornographic, relates first and foremost to whether it succeeds in sexually arousing its audience. Something is pornographic not so much by virtue of the material itself as of the context in which it is placed; in other words by reason of various factors such as how it is produced, how and by whom and in what situation it is used, and finally the special codes that surround it, by which I mean the social inscriptions that it bears. The fact that its primary purpose is to excite physically places it in a – problematic – social category of its own, since the state of arousal is an ‘unspeakable’ one. The term ‘pornographic’ is value-laden insofar as it is not, unlike, say, erotica, imbued with universal (and thus we assume ‘acceptable’) aesthetic associations. It seems that we disassociate museums of erotic art from the concept of pornography by placing explicit material in a public, collective sphere, and publish explicit art in books under titles like *Erotica Universalis.* By contrast, pornography’s traditional environment is underground, secret, out of reach, and individual (think of the tiny entrances to peepshows, think of the magazines stored under the bed, or above our heads, almost out of sight, in the newsagent), its traditional function sexual self-gratification. To a certain extent, explicit sexual material becomes pornographic if we receive it as such: we confer that status upon it. This basic fact is something that must of course be central to an understanding of the pornographic image and its function, and yet often is not really addressed in studies.

The common basis for a feminist critique of pornography is the notion that the heterosexual pornographic subject is almost without exception female and performs for a male gaze. Many feminists have been concerned by the apparent ease with which

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pornography is digested in its various forms, and have argued that its presence sustains a basic inequality between the sexes. They claim that pornography can never be justified, not even in its lightest, most 'harmless' forms, simply because it represents the face of an inherently unequal sexuality. This is because the objectification of the female subject arising both out of the performance and the expectation that the viewer will be male and therefore, presumably, both looking at and placing himself as subject into the picture, confirms and enforces traditional patterns of power. These theoretical claims are supported by a number of studies which have been conducted into the pornography industry and which confirm that women in the industry are oppressed on the basis of gender. Catherine Itzin suggests that pornography depends on women's and children's subordinate economic status, exploiting the poorest and most vulnerable members of society who are often victims of child abuse or have been subject to race discrimination.55 This seems to me to be an appropriate critique of the practical structure of the pornography industry, for there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that whilst the female porn stars, the 'big names', might command high salaries and good, safe working conditions, the majority of women working in the industry have very few rights, are poorly paid, and are often subject to various levels of abuse.

In terms of what pornography actually represents, we do not, I think, have to go as far as radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin, who makes overarching claims about pornography's role in the universal oppression of Woman, to make the observation that pornography as fantasy is not innocent of the power imbalance between the sexes.56 We might look to these fantasies and ask ourselves why the fairly staple diet of sexual dominance and subservience to be found in pornography is such a potent part of the sexual imaginings of both genders. Fantasy is often deeply conservative, an act of

'imagination' that re-enacts (and thus is totally dependent on) existent sexual discourses. This is where we can really approach the complex and urgent issue of the response to what is shown, as something that is both highly physical and at the same time absolutely dependent on the significations surrounding a sexual act and the gendered body itself. Whilst pornography speaks to the body, it also relies on the viewer (or reader) being able to sustain the fiction of what is being shown and to summon the 'correct' response. What is being shown is, generally, a limited number of repetitive acts or shots: the viewer must suspend the knowledge of the reality of the production and be able to enter fully into its excessive, repetitive representational mode. This is undoubtedly a more complex experience for women: besides the intellectual knowledge that the pornography market has always been and continues to be driven by male interests, the fictions themselves and the way that these are shown by the camera obviously reflect this interest. From an industrial perspective, women are faced with a literal and metaphorical male gaze, making it more difficult to identify with that gaze, even if what they see might still arouse. Whether there will ever be a 'pornography for women' is doubtful. The fact that lesbian porn has been co-opted by the male heterosexual market (so-called 'girl-girl' scenes have become an intrinsic part of porn movies over the last decade) demonstrates how the discourse of pornography is constructed and read: the pornographic subject is principally female, performing for and objectified by a male gaze. Gay porn, by contrast, is a niche market, because only queer men are allowed to be interested in queer sex. Laurence O'Toole, whose text Pornocopia (as the title might suggest) attempts to rehabilitate the pornography industry as a valid form of entertainment – for women as for men – is of course anxious to suggest that women's situation is improving, and uses the 'girl-girl' scene as an example. He says that '[w]hat was damned for so long as being particularly reprehensible, especially exploitative of women, has turned into a key site, or sign of
porn women’s growing power. [...] [M]any women spend a long time while working in the business ‘doing’ only other women prior to their first on-stage screw with a man.\textsuperscript{57}

As an argument in support of the emancipation of women in the industry, this could not be less convincing. O’Toole uses as the basis of his argument material collated in interviews with performers and internet porn users. Whilst his text affords an interesting glimpse of the world of pornography, its thesis seems to be that desire and fantasy share universal characteristics across the board, and that therefore it is only a matter of time before women are full participants in the creation of the discourse of pornography, as happy, self-determined female actors, as directors, and as viewers. It seems to me though that established pornographic codes fundamentally depend on the viewer being able to enter into certain fantasies that are always already strictly delineated along gender lines, and it is clear that these fantasies are structured around the woman as object of the male. As she is (fictionally) already both desired and desiring, and therefore as it were colluding in the male fantasy, it is difficult to imagine how either female actors or viewers might effect change in these coded representations on which pornography relies.

**Quoting porn: pornographic iconography in Die Klavierspielerin**

I have tried, in this brief account, to address some of the well-known debates around the pornography industry, as well as to attempt a definition of it, as a way of approaching a text that seems to encourage the use of the term. The publicity shots for Die Klavierspielerin depict the author in full bondage, inviting the ‘viewer’ to look and to enter into the text. Once there, the reader is rewarded with peep-shows, accompanies Erika on a nightly excursion to the Prater to watch copulating couples, is party to her s/m fantasies, and finally witnesses her rape. The text offers, in short, a good range of

staple pornographic images. However, as I have discussed at length, the text is exceptionally self-conscious, and the narrative voice militates against our identification with what is shown. My aim, in the following analysis, is to inquire into the nature of the relationship between the pornographic codes of the narrative and the self-reflecting narrative mode. I want to ask also whether and if so how Jelinek, as a female author writing into a traditional male territory in language, accords any transformational quality to the pornographic elements by means of which the narrative proceeds.

I would contend that Jelinek’s own gender does contribute a particular focus to a text like *Die Klavierspielerin*, even if only because it destabilises reader expectations. The production of pomography, like the product itself, is gendered, and even though Jelinek in principle refuses the label of woman writer, she is well aware of the fact that her texts invite a scandalised response at least partly because of her gender. Discussing the *Prater* scene in an interview, for example, she remarks: ‘[d]as ist ein Moment, der ziemlich schokierend ist für die meisten Leser, weil daß eine Frau sowas tut ist schon mal schlimm genug und daß eine Frau sowas beschreibt ist nochmal ein bissel schlimmer.’

She is also highly conscious of the way in which a pornographic discourse is marked as masculine. In an interview with Margarete Lamb-Faffelberger, discussing her later novel *Lust*, she comments on the supposed failure of her objective to create a pornography for women by women:


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58 'Regine Friedrich und Horst Tim Lehner unterhalten sich mit Elfriede Jelinek über den Roman *Die Klavierspielerin*’, SDR 2, 22 July 1983.
Since both the language and the perspective of pornography are male, according to Jelinek, as a female author she is outside its structures and incapable of realigning them. Yet the fundamental incompatibility she perceives is precisely the source of the parodic force of her writing, as Allyson Fiddler has demonstrated in an article comparing Lust with the text that inspired it, Georges Bataille's 'Histoire de l'Oeil'. Fiddler's detailed analysis of the narrative voice allows her to conclude that in Lust the sex is mediated and commented upon by the narrator, in 'Geschichte des Auges' the narrator merges into and endorses the pornographic scenario.\(^6\) Ulrich Struve, similarly, points to this lack of narratorial endorsement in a text whose 'camouflage as a pornographic book enables the attack on reader expectations and the subversion of the genre: what pornography promises unceasingly, Lust, is [...] strikingly absent in the text.'\(^6\) Struve quotes the narrator's comment, 'hhaben Sie noch immer Lust zu lesen und zu leben? Nein? Na also' (Lust, 70), in support of his assertion that the central (desired) effect of the text is 'disrupting pleasures (of textual consumption).'</p>

These analyses can, I think, be applied equally to the pornographic patternings of Die Klavierspielerin, whose particular characteristic makes of it neither a 'mißlungenen Porno' nor, exactly, a 'weiblichen anti-Porno' (both descriptions employed variously by the press). Jelinek does not adopt a pornographic discourse uncritically, but rather inhabits it and mimics its structures and codes. What I am therefore concerned with is to explore how the mimicking narrative avoids a perpetuation or reinforcement of certain discourses. I shall contend that it does, convincingly, transform the pornographic discourse into something self-reflexive and therefore self-critical, and that it does so by placing the reader in a particular uneasy relationship to the imagery. I would like to reiterate, in this context, how the reader is held in thrall to a quotational narrative voice that at the same time

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prohibits identification with what is shown. This relationship, I suggest, is precisely the same, whether we are in a familial, sexual or artistic environment.

The pornographic element of *Die Klavierspielerin* runs insistently through the text, and provides a counter theme to the acceptable face of Vienna and its music culture. On the one hand, we have cultural, on the other, sexual consumption. Erika’s identity is wedded to her sexuality and her music, and these two are threaded together through the figure of Klemmer, who, as Erika’s pupil, becomes the focus of her attention early on in the text. From the instant that Klemmer is introduced (30), the mutual awareness of sexuality is manifest, if latent: from the teacher’s perspective, the young man is ‘ein[ ] hübscher blonde[r] Bursche[ ]’ (30), and in turn her student comes early to the school, leaves late, and watches her play ‘sei es nur mit Singsang und Klingklang fallera oder die H-Dur-Tonleiter.’ (31) But this initial attraction is already clothed in rigid structures of power:

Die Lehrerin, die auf ihrem hohen Roß sitzt, dämpft den jungen Mann ab, indem sie in bezug auf den Schöenberg spitz sagt: so gut können Sie ihn wieder auch noch nicht. Wie gern überläßt der Schüler sich einer solchen Lehrkraft, selbst wenn sie auf ihn herabblickt, wobei sie die Zügel fest in der Hand behält. (31-2)

The language of ritualistic humiliation in which their relationship is couched quotes from traditional fantasies of the dominatrix and her slave. Erika, whip in hand, towers above her student, who eagerly submits to her devastating criticism. In this context though, what is usually created through role-play (by acting out such fetishised hierarchical structures as teacher/student, nurse/patient or nanny/baby) has a basis in fact. The effect is irresistibly comic, because the intrinsically ludicrous fantasy is recontextualised with the piano as the stage and interpretations of Schönberg as the script. At the same time, this parodic representation of Klemmer’s stirring emotions establishes unequivocally the link between the imaginary and the symbolic: his conventional fantasies simply rehearse those actual structures of power operative around him. The private realm of the sexual and/or emotional, far from representing a refuge
from these structures, in fact is shown to be the site where they are most rigidly in place.
The link between sexuality and power, already established in Erika's relationship with
the mother (to whom she is symbolically married), is further developed through the
figure of Klemmer, whose interaction with Erika is codified exclusively in these terms.
Both these relationships can be precisely understood as complex equations of power.
With respect to the mother, the link between age and power, where age represents some
sort of natural authority whilst youth has the edge in terms of physical strength and
independent potential, is shown within the familial hierarchy, where mother dictates to
child (but old mother is usurped by child) and child replaces father as the most powerful
element of the family. With respect to Klemmer, similarly, there are two issues. Erika's
authority is based on her status, as older woman and teacher. Klemmer is a musically
gifted student, challenging her status as teacher, but some years her junior. The age gap
is underlined by his constant references to his sporting prowess, in which his over­
developed sense of his own youth is made manifest, and quickly attains significance as
a constitutive part of the axis of power on which the sexual exchange takes place. Both
parties are aware of this, but Klemmer in particular is able to articulate to himself (and
later to Erika) the agenda he brings to the relationship: 'Er ist der ganz persönliche
Ansicht, daß Fräulein Kohut genau jene Frau ist, die ein junger Mann sich zum
Einspielen ins Leben wünscht. Der junge Mann fängt klein an und steigert sich rasch.
Einmal muß jeder anfangen.' (65) His comparison of the experience to that of buying a
first car is (like the butcher's analogy of the father with a piece of meat, discussed
above, p. 40) grotesquely comic: '[…] sie ist eigentlich noch gar nicht so alt, wertet der
Schüler sein Versuchsmodell auf. Klemmer fängt sogar eine Stufe höher an, kein VW,
sondern Opel Kadett.' (66) The material desire that is the engine of capitalism is
inseparable from physical or emotional desire, as it is from the culture machine music.
The lingua franca in this society is a discourse of power, whose winners are the richest,
the youngest, the fittest and the most talented, and the market value of the rest judged accordingly. And as Klemmer's emphasis on Erika's age shows, the value of women goes down the fastest. Within the pervasive pornographic iconography of the narrative, Erika is just an ageing whore with a terminal shelf life, and thus, as well as the promise of desire, she signifies the end of desire. It is this meta-awareness brought to the pornographic iconography by way of the capitalist intertext that, I suggest, allows for a refusal of the text's pornographic status and a radical critique of its own subject.

I have already discussed how one of the prerequisites of pornography is the ability to sustain the fiction of immediacy, of availability and of willingness, in other words to ignore or be unaware of the clichéd recycling of desire with which pornography is generically marked. This is, I would venture, a more simple accomplishment in the visual medium, which tends to support the conventions upon which the private desires of the consumer rest. In a live performance the customer has direct visual (though rarely physical) access to the object of his desire, and in a video or magazine he can place himself in the position of the original viewer, banishing the cameraman from the frame and establishing the space to be alone with his own intensely private desires and fantasies. This does not mean that it is not possible to sustain this fiction when it is narrated: centuries of texts have eloquently testified to this. The graphic depiction of sexual behaviour in words can be eminently consumable, if the text collaborates with the reader's own desires. The infamous Josefine Mutzenbacher oder die Geschichte einer wienerischen Dirne von ihr selbst erzählt, a fictional autobiography which appeared at the turn of the century and scandalised the decent citizens of Vienna, is a fine example of a mode of writing which is never narrated as a meta-version of itself, as an intransitive 'talking about' as opposed to a transitive 'seeing' pornography. It is a text, in other words, that seeks to invoke an immediate, non-reflexive response in its

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readership, relying on the irresistible ingredients of incest and paedophilia for its effect. Peperl, the protagonist, who also narrates her story, is initiated by her brother – at the age of seven – into the world from which she will later earn her living, and just a few years later replaces her dead mother in her father's bed. The narrator and main character thus plays the object of others' desires at the same time as she is set up in the text as an endlessly desiring subject, for whom sex is an addictive source of pleasure. This increases the titillating value for the reader, who can fantasise that the object actually has desires (in the same way, the girls in the peep show must give their clients the all-important message that they are there for their own, as well as your, enjoyment). If there is any attempt at social critique (the young Peperl does not have any model apart from the over-sexualised environment), it is subsumed under the sheer quantity of sexual encounters described. Thus the narrative constructs and mediates the image of the object Peperl to the reader without at the same time mediating any true critical force, and the text ultimately colludes with the reader's fantasies by providing the pornographic deceit of the desiring, fantasising object. The fact that no author put a name to the text increased its allure, because there remained the possibility that it was really an autobiography.63

The Jelinek text, indebted as it is to the same proliferating, replicating images of desire that mark the Mutzenbacher text as pornography, is critically distinct from its Viennese predecessor. Its methodology can be described as a translation of the pornographic into literature (which makes it intertextual) rather than as a pornographic literature (which seeks to collapse the threatening gap created by the intertext in language). In short, the narrative context of that depiction of sexual behaviour in Jelinek provides a meta-context, not however so much moral or psychological (as the

63 The text was generally attributed to a man, Felix Salten. Known through his contribution to children's literature (he was the author of Bambi), this rumour added an extra whiff of scandal to the Mutzenbacher affair.
Mutzenbacher text might have been, had its author chosen to weight it differently) as intertextual and narratively-quotational. Jelinek uses the fiction of substantial desire, located in an endlessly willing bodiliness, and obsessional desire, located in the all-enveloping turn-on, but in a radically contextualised environment which is equally forceful in its anti-substantial, anti-obsessional quality. That is to say, she invokes these images as a generic intertext in quotation marks, as it were, so that they can be challenged not only by other forms of discourse (Marxist, psychoanalytic, etc.), but by our, the readers’, knowing that it is only a ‘form of speech’, a Redensart, in Bachmann’s sense. Desire is qualified by the text at the same time as it is enacted in it, and this is what distinguishes it as a type of anti-pornography. I would like to explore these textual mechanisms with an analysis of the peep-show scene, which seems to me paradigmatic of the way desire is instated and refused by the ironic intertextual modes of the narrative.

The textualisation of sexual desire: the peep-show

The description of Erika’s visit to the unpalatable underbelly of Vienna begins with the journey itself, and focuses on Erika’s persona as a respectable music teacher. Her status as ‘Frau Professor’ is given ludicrous weight, as is her exactitude in clothing, whereby her old-fashioned skirt ‘bedeckt genau die Knie, kein Millimeter drunter, keiner drüber.’ (46) Much emphasis is placed on her unapproachability, the zip on her music case (which reminds us again of her professional status) becoming a symbol of her closure to the outer world: ‘Erika hat alles an sich geschlossen, was da Verschlüsse hat.’ (47) The journey is configured as a transgression from the safe world of music and the conservatoire, in other words acceptable culture, to an unfamiliar world of danger, the morality of society disintegrating in direct relation to the distance she travels away from her ‘normal’ world: ‘[d]as sind Gegenden, die man nicht aufsucht, wenn man nicht muß.'
Auch die Schüler kommen selten von hier. Keine Musik hält sich hier länger, als eine Platte in der Musicbox braucht.' (47) So Erika’s perspective is both that of the teacher, observing with distaste and an element of fear an unwelcome environment into which she has stumbled, and of the compulsive voyeur. Her step is purposeful, her destination well known, and there is a discrepancy between her observations and the fact that she has clearly trodden this path before. This discrepancy sets up the peep-show scene, conveyed in Erika’s voice, as a critique of a sordid industry that is at the same time radically undermined for the reader by her very presence as a commentator.

The perspective remains Erika’s as she approaches and enters the insalubrious little building squashed into the arch of a viaduct; her constricted opinion of the foreign men who make up the great majority of the paying guests ensures that she retains the narrative voice: ‘[d]en Türken ist die Bogenform sicherlich vage von ihren Moscheen her vertraut. Vielleicht erinnert sie das Ganze auch an einen Harem’. (49) The detail in which the building and its procedures are conveyed strikes a tone which combines both the critical, exposing the mechanisms of the peep-show for what they are, and the perverse, exposing Erika as a ghoulish onlooker, enthralled but almost untitillated by what she sees. Although we enter the peep-show via an extended description of the journey seen through Erika’s perspective, in the building itself hers is not the only voice advancing the narrative. Various voices are interjected, including those of the other paying guests (all men, of course), the women on show, and even the cleaning ladies. The different voices, detectable more through being implied than through being marked out in any way, destabilise the text in that they transform the pornographic images into a parodic cliché of the industry. The apparently faithful translocation of the visual to the textual in all its simplicity mercilessly strips the scene of its erotic potential, and reinvests it with grotesque functionality. So the girls are rotated for the benefit of the regular customer, ‘[s]onst kommt er ja nicht mehr’ (50), and the mechanical routine is
further stripped of its excitement in the description of their sexual relief: whilst one hand feeds the voracious money slit, ‘die andere pump die Mannskraft sinnlos zum Fenster hinaus. Der Mann ißt zuhause für drei, und hier läßt er es einfach achtlos zu Boden klatschen.’ (50) The erlebte Rede is that of a generic, disapproving housewife, who could be Erika’s mother, or, we suspect, Erika herself. The titillating goods on offer in the sex-shop are marketed in terms of their practical qualities, so the ‘winzige Nylonwä sche’ is designed for good access to the woman at home, and is on offer because ‘Frauen gibt es nicht zu erwerben’ here. (50) No question of colour problems to match the wife, either, since there are two options, obviously, and ‘[e]iner blonden Frau steht Schwarz besser, einer Schwarzen steht rot besser.’ (51) The erotic pretensions of the men who buy blow-up ‘Frauenimitationen’ are deflated by the comic neatness of the parallel: ‘[z]uerst sehen sie drinnen die echte Frau, dann kaufen sie draußen das Imitat.’ (51)

Observing the scene as a voyeur, Erika is also under observation, and the surprise of her female presence renders her as visible as the show girls. The normal polarisation of male/female is disrupted by her entrance. The men, used to the security of the active/passive paradigm of the sex-show, where men see, women are seen, find no connection between Erika and the objects of their male desire when she invades their territory. Suddenly, the linguistic ability to dehumanise with collective objectification has passed to the other side. The men, a few seconds earlier ‘Einzelpersönlichkeiten’, confident that women ‘unterscheiden sich […] höchstens in der Haarfarbe’ are now themselves no more than undifferentiated amalgamations of national identity fused together in ‘Enklaven und Sprachinseln’. (51) The transferral of a language used to define and name others is concomitant with a loss of previously assumed masculine power. The men ‘weichen vor dieser Erscheinung aus einer anderen Welt zurück’, regaining their speech and some semblance of composure significantly only ‘hinter
Erikas Rücken'. (51-2) Such is the collective disorientation that even ‘ein Schwerbetrunkener’ (52) forgets to grope her as she passes. Since the industry depends on a clear contradistinction between the sexes, a heterosexual pornographic discourse is defined by means of the physical and psychological boundaries erected to confirm its sexual nature. Transgressing into the male corner, Erika both retains and problematises her female identity within the pornographic matrix. As a woman, she passes scornful judgement on the other sex:

Die zwei Solo-Apartments mit individueller Bedienung für den anspruchsvollen Mann stehen hier fast immer leer. Denn es findet sich nur selten ein Mann, der Sonderwünsche äußern kann. Erika betritt, ganz Frau Lehrerin, die Lokalität. (53)

Erika articulates that sense of limitation and rigidity associated with fantasy, yet what is it that distinguishes her from these men? In the same way that as a teenager she aspires to but never realises imaginative flights of fancy, the structures of her adult fantasies are revealed to be every bit as clichéd as those of the other clientele. This is made particularly clear in the letter she composes later to Klemmer, where her fantasies are set out parodically in an utterly unoriginal and endlessly recycled discourse of masochistic desire.

In the peep-show, similarly, the conventional nature of desire is parodied in a psychobabble that permits no departure from the signifying norms of gender:

Eine Hand streckt sich, schon zögernd, nach ihr aus, zuckt aber zurück. Sie geht nicht in die Abteilung für Angestellte des Hauses, sondern in die Abteilung für zahlende Gäste. [...] Diese Frau will sich etwas anschauen, das sie sich zu Hause viel billiger im Spiegel betrachten könnte. (53)

The mirror is as redundant a symbol in a man’s world as it is assumed in a woman’s: earlier in this scene the narrator comments on the uselessness of a mirror placed in each cabin ‘in dem man sich betrachten kann. Man weiß nicht wozu, vielleicht damit man nachher seine Haare kämmen kann.’ (50) The woman is fundamentally unseeing flesh, her image confirmed in the gaze of the man, who is always already a fully formed and
autonomous subject. The girl performing the sexual routine cannot see her audience through the one way glass; her eyes only exist performatively to demonstrate her 'pleasure' at being watched: '[e]s schließt, enzückt, daß so viele zusehen, die Augen und öffnet diese ganz nach oben in den Kopf gedreht wieder.' (56) The Lacanian intertext appearing in the context of an obviously second-rate sexual performance is an impostor in this sordid environment, and all the more amusing because of the transformation it is accorded into the vernacular:

Haarbuschige Dreiecke erglimmend herausmeibeln, denn das ist das allererste, worauf der Mann schaut, da gibt es ein Gesetz dafür. Der Mann schaut auf das Nichts, er schaut auf den reinen Mangel. Zuerst schaut er auf dieses Nichts, dann kommt die restliche Mutti auch noch dran. (54)

The law to which the narrator refers is Lacan's symbolic Law of the Father, whereby the male child goes through the process of rejecting his anatomically different mother, whose lack of the signifying phallus leads to his identification with the father. The Law of the Father, which precipitates a symbolic apprehension of sexual difference, as well as individuation and the accompanying normalisation of heterosexual desire, is founded in the prohibitive signifying force of the phallus and its lack. The incest taboo, which for the little boy entails a rejection of his anatomically different mother in favour of an identification with his father, is more complex for the little girl because the Law of the Father dictates that she must first transfer her primary love for the mother onto the father, who is in possession of the symbolic phallus, but then reject her desire for the father and look for a different object of desire outside the incestuous kinship. As a representative language attained upon entering the symbolic from the imaginary, the recognition of the implications of the balance between the phallus and its lack is crucial to the formation of an intelligible gender differentiation. For the masculine to attain its place as the undifferentiated subject of language, from where the feminine can be symbolically marked off and differentiated, the phallus must be accepted as the symbolic site of signification. This implies that there is an unproblematic polar relation
between the phallus and its lack, but Lacan, despite the convenience of his phallic symbol as an expression of the male, struggled to formulate the feminine more specifically than as a largely unrepresentable absence linguistically excluded by the phallus. In Lacan’s economy of representation, the unrepresentable, the fearful unknown, is coupled with the fear of castration produced in both the boy and the girl by the sight of the mother’s perceived lack. At the same time the male needs the complement of the female as a symbolic assurance of his status. Hence, the female is conceived of as a threatening figure.

In Jelinek’s tongue-in-cheek reference to the ‘Gesetz’, the Law of the Father and Lacanian psychoanalysis comes back into the text ironically as a distilled version of the original theory which still manages to expose its own original weakness, namely the ease with which a theory of language and signification mutates into a theory of the physical and the literal: the men looking at the woman’s ‘Nichts’ are contained absolutely within a highly physical, sexualised environment which has nothing to do with the symbolic. Far from being interested in Lacan, these men have not even heard of him, and the intertext, on one level, is simply typical of the different levels on which the text exists, whereby the narrator uses a reference as a way of inviting the reader into an intellectual game which excludes the characters. But, as usual, I would assert that the aim of the game is not one of one-upmanship on the characters, a way of making the reader feel superior for having recognised the intertext. Rather, the Lacanian reference

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64 Jacques Lacan, ‘The Signification of the Phallus’, in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977). Unsurprisingly, feminists have been critical of what has come to be known through Irigaray as Lacan’s phallogocentrism, and authors such as Jane Gallop and Jacqueline Rose have challenged his theory of identity formation in various ways. Gallop’s *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter’s Seduction* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982) reads Lacan against a number of other theorists, notably Irigaray, and uses these encounters as a way of ‘dephallicizing the father’ (introduction, xv), which accordingly challenges the assumptions (largely based in different misapprehensions of language) of both feminism and Lacanian psychoanalysis: ‘as long as the attribute of power is a phallus which refers to and can be confused (in the imaginary register?) with a penis, this confusion will support a structure in which it seems reasonable that men have power and women do not. And as long as psychoanalysts maintain the separability of ‘phallus’ from ‘penis’, they can hold on to their ‘phallus’ in the belief that their discourse has no relation to sexual inequality, no relation to politics.’ (97)
is a particular specific instance of a pervasive psychoanalytic intertext which is used to articulate the pornographic desires of the text's characters, and which enables the tension, characteristic of the intertext, to be maintained. The quotational structure allows the reader to register the force of the pornographic iconography, whilst recognising its relation to the context of overwhelming oppression and repression that runs insistently through the text. Therefore, whilst one part of the effect of the reference is to expose the irremediable waffle into which Lacan-speak can descend, by the way in which the 'Law' is so majestically invoked in such an inappropriate context, with inevitably humorous effect, this humour becomes the backdrop for a more testing response to the intertextual narrative modes through which the environment of the peep-show is refracted.

The sheer weight of reference and allusion in the passage, the mixture of different registers, means that whilst the pornographic voice remains utterly compulsive, it is also hugely discomforting, as it does not comply with pornography's rules, namely the immersion factor. The unequivocal parallel between desire and money, the pennies clicking in the slot, the hard work of masturbation driven as much by economics as by sexual desire (time equals money), brings pornography into focus as part of an oppressive capitalist economy, whose structures in turn link back to pornography with its clichéd fantasies of domination/subservience. The sheer excess of detail, however, is entirely faithful to the pornographic mode, and the cliché itself is fundamentally part of what traditionally turns us on, part of pornography's repetitive overkill of images and dialogue. Hence, the narrative, structurally, colludes with its theme, reinstating the pornographic element, and inviting a knee-jerk response from the reader. In the same way that the text is energised in the process of the depiction of sexual frenzy, it also depends on a further aspect of the compulsive pornographic experience, namely the act of looking. The men are there as ‘Nachtschmetterlinge [...] [d]ie etwas für ihr Geld
sehen wollen' (52), and, since 'das Wirtschaftsgeld verbraucht sich schnell', they concentrate on the job in hand: '[n]ichts kann den Männern beim Schauen entgehen.' (53) Erika is also there to look: '[t]agsüber rechnet sie manchmal aus, wie oft sie für ihre gesparten Zehner schauen kann' (54); 'Erika sitzt einfach und blickt hinein' (54); 'Sie schaut andauernd hin. Kaum schaut sie einmal weg, sind schon wieder ein paar Schilling futsch.' (55) Her gaze is compulsive, and unlike the masturbating men around her, unrelieved: 'Erika kann nichts dafür. Sie muß und muß schauen. Sie ist für sich selbst tabu. Anfassen gibt es nicht.' (56) The construction of the narrative as overlaid perspectives represents a structural imitation of pornography's voyeuristic modes: the reader watches the narrator watching Erika watching the girl performing. The lack of contact and the radical isolation inherent in this act of looking is also a central idea of the text as a whole. Pornography relies on identification (that is, the fiction of reciprocal desire) for its effects, and yet in reality it bespeaks distance and unobtainability. Gazing at the performing girl, the narrative inscribes the space between fantasy and reality particularly brutally: '[s]ie zeigt mit dem ganzen Gesicht, wie toll es wäre, könnte sie nur bei dir sein. Aber leider ist dies aufgrund der starken Nachfrage nicht möglich'. (56) Desire remains essentially unfulfilled, the object remains beyond reach. And in the Rilke citation, taken from his 'Herbsttag', that precedes Erika's abrupt departure, suddenly the ironic voice falls away and something more like desperation is felt: '[w]er jetzt nicht kann, der kann nie mehr. Wer jetzt allein ist, wird es lange und ungern bleiben.' (57) In Rilke's poem, the ebbing summer yields to a more urgently felt rhythm of autumn:

Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr.
Wer jetzt allein ist, wird es lange bleiben,
will wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben
und wird in den Alleen hin und her
unruhig wandern, wenn die Blätter treiben.\(^5\)

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Far from losing the unsettling, melancholic force that captures the changing of the seasons in the original, in the new context, juxtaposed with the pumping rhythms of the men in their booths, the poetic voice is retained disconcertingly intact, engendering an instance of heightened reflexivity in an environment denoting the very opposite.

**Poetic and musical desire**

The poetic consciousness that we hear punctuating the peep-show with such extraordinary force is present throughout the narrative. The Rilke intertext, interjecting a note of melancholy into the text, is an exemplary moment. The audacious coupling of this citation from the 'Herbsttag' with the banal expression 'Der Kandidat hat 99 Punkte!' (57) is, of course, typical of Jelinek's ability to impose a structural, aesthetic unity on disparate images (the effects of which I have already discussed at some length). Further to this, though, I would like to suggest that the Rilke and, as well, the Schubert intertexts that accompany Erika through the narrative play a critical role in the text. As well as being instrumental in opening up what I have called an ironic space for the reader, and thus very much part of that extensive ironic intertextuality at work in the text, these poetic and musical threads have a particular force that, I am concerned to show, promise to generate as much an emotional as an intellectual response. In this sense, I would argue that the critical force of the text is achieved not by way of an undifferentiated satirical and cruel narrative voice, but by way of the surprise or shock of its modulations; and further, that we can perhaps find, in our differentiated response, something of an answer to the question of how we come to terms with the text's radically pessimistic message. My analysis up to this point has been concerned with an essentially negating narrator figure: the characters are constructed and maintained as types by way of an intertextual configuration of different voices that effectively function to invalidate one another, even whilst they retain their recognisable form. Thus the
text's pornographic iconography is installed but collapses into self-conscious parody; the relationships within the family are given to be understood in psychoanalytic terms, yet simultaneously rendered curiously empty of meaning within the Märchen, the savagely bourgeois economy of one-upmanship, and the natural (here, read social) language of Darwinian survival; the language of music is related as repetition and capital; finally, romantic love is sterilised as a fantasy of power and humiliation, hypothetically played out in Erika's clichéd masochistic letter to Klemmer and in his own analogical musings, where the two stereotypically male discourses of sport and mechanics vie to give true expression to his love. Yet it is my contention that the narrative, despite the radical negativity of its subject, is at the same time in itself profoundly affirmative, insofar as it succeeds in transcending the stasis of its central figure. In the following discussion, I shall focus on aspects of the text that I believe demonstrate this positive force, and argue that the text permits – indeed, requires – a correspondingly positive response in its readership.

The question that seems to present itself most forcefully with regards to this assertion is one to do with the status of individual experience and emotion. I have argued that the narrative consistently undermines this notion in respect of its characters, ironising Erika's self-perceived particularity and using intertextual modes in ironic support of the normative social structures in which each individual is shown to be embroiled. Yet, as we have seen, the quotational mode is intensely critical in nature, and assumes a critical faculty in its reader. It therefore, logically, would suggest faith in a humanity that is seemingly absent from the text itself. As I have already been concerned to show, the narrative voice does command an intensely ethical response, and therefore does also qualify (and arguably counter) its own pessimistic vision. This implicit restoration of an emotional dimension to the text is not only central to an argument in defence of the text from those critics who condemn its negative message; it also, I feel, holds the key to the
effectiveness of the text’s whole critical force. The emotional dimension is, it is important to establish, not dependent on being able to identify emotionally with the characters, all of whom resist our sympathy. It is, rather, intrinsically bound up with the potential response to a represented social malaise, with the characters as metaphorical instances within. The fact that Erika, as the central instance of this malaise, cannot ‘make’ stories is an elemental part of the social ‘story’ as it is staged. As I have tried to show, this staging (as an ironic narrative) is what ensures our interest over and above concerns for Erika’s particular fate. And it is my concern to argue now that in the staging of Erika’s own malaise, we do find confirmation of the presence of those human elements that Erika representatively seems to forbid. My analysis will take as its point of departure the Schubert intertexts that punctuate Erika’s ‘development’: in this respect I shall be following Annegret Mahler-Bungers, whose interesting psychoanalytical reading explores the notion of Trauer via the signifying intertext. However, my own pursuit of the redemptive element of the text departs from hers insofar as it does not focus abstractly on a psychological interpretation of absence but considers the concrete intersecting of the intertext with the narrative, and the resulting impact on the reader.

The Schubert intertext forms the backbone of the music in the text, which is played on many levels. As I hope I have made clear, the theme of music is as much a symbolic commentary on, as a counterpoint to, the main erotic or sexual drives which govern the characters. For the mother, music is a commodity that she has forced upon her daughter for economic reasons and status. For Erika and her pupil, it initially forms a foil to their sexual desires, and their shared musical tastes (symbolising their mutual attraction) slowly give way to disagreements (the juggling of power establishing their respective claims and needs). Thematically, too, music runs parallel to sexuality in the sense that whilst it promises to liberate, it functions within the same constricting framework as sexuality: both are expressive of a dog-eat-dog world of hierarchical structures of power
which are crucially economic in nature. Jelinek’s qualification of music within these frameworks is always already fraught precisely because music also promises transcendence: that quality of the sublime is not so much undermined as lent further intensity by the frightful banality with which it is endlessly associated in the text. It seems to me that our response to the Schubert intertext in particular depends critically on an apprehension of beauty not relativised by the ironic mode, even when it is placed ‘inappropriately’ in direct textual relation to those dominant pornographic intertexts wherein Erika’s sexuality is articulated.

The first citation comes at the end of a relatively long episode depicting the adolescent Erika’s first sexual encounter, with her cousin: later that evening, she slits open her wrists with one of her father’s razor blades and watches the blood escape. (45)

The account of this self-harm is crafted around part of a text by Wilhelm Müller in Schubert’s song cycle Die Winterreise. The Lied in which this text appears, entitled ‘Wasserflut’, tells of the wanderer imagining his tears for his lost love forming a river in the snow and running back to the town where she lives. It is filled with longing and desolation. The intertextual impact afforded the words by their recontextualisation in the new text is remarkable. In the context of Erika’s self-mutilation, the lyrical quality of the citation ironically invokes everything that is opposite to what is unfolding in the scene itself, and creates another level of narrative running at once parallel and counter to the first:


The symbolism of nature, woods, streams, tears and emotion casts the bloodless mental and bloody physical precision of Erika’s practised art into relief, and underwrites the

extent to which she is bereft of emotion. Its effectiveness stems from the way in which the narrative appropriates the original lyrical force and makes it constitutive of the new text. The second Schubert citation again marks a moment where Erika’s isolation is particularly apparent. It occurs at the beginning of the scene where her voyeuristic desires take her to the Prater in search of forbidden glimpses of sexual exploits. As she walks through the night, ‘[s]ie vermeidet die Stege, wo die andren Wandrer gehen.’ (140) Jelinek’s intertext replaces the wanderer from Müller’s text, ‘Der Wegweiser’, again from Die Winterreise (who in his grief for his lost love eschews human contact by avoiding the places where other people walk) with Erika (who avoids the places where people walk, the better to locate them coupling). The final citation occurs later in the same scene, when Erika has surpassed all her own expectations by managing to witness, at close quarters, a sordid sexual encounter in the bushes between an Austrian girl and a Turkish man, and is crouching, avoiding detection as they disengage. This time, the citation is from the beginning of the fourth song, entitled ‘Ständchen’, of another Schubert cycle, Schwanengesang, in which the hopeful romantic tries to seduce his love with songs. The girl ‘fleht aus der Ferne leise Lieder’ (146) before stuffing something between her legs and mopping up the fluid. Again, the citation achieves a discomforting force in the narrative, as the ironic narrative voice suddenly modulates into a lyrical cadence, falling away from the brutal and immediate visual imagery of which it is part. The lyric is picked up several times later during the rape scene, when Erika pleads with Klemmer to stop: ‘[s]ie fleht, bis die Späne auflofern und man bald einen dickeren Klotz Verlangen nachlegen kann’ (268); ‘[i]ch flehe dich an, fleht sie’ (272); ‘[die Mutter] fleht Gott und dessen Sohn an’ (272); ‘[d]ie Tochter fleht den Mann an, die Mami herauszulassen.’ (274) Here, the force of the verb ‘flehen’, as an expression of eminently personal desperation, is preserved but refracted by the ironic mode of the episode as a whole, where the mother ‘hält der Tochter die prophezeiten Folgen der
männlichen Liebe vor Augen’ (272), Erika’s ‘Nachhemd ist verrutscht, und Klemmer erwägt eine Vergewaltigung’ (273) and so on. The episode is compulsive precisely because the reader is not supplied with the expected substance that such an event would suggest: instead the narrative, stylising Klemmer as a sportsman, describing Erika’s role (woman as victim) rather than entering into it, keeps us at arm’s length and forces us to reflect on the implications of the episode and the relations of power that it portrays.

Whilst Erika remains a type figure even in the most personal, private invasion of her space, the reader is called upon to bring to bear an ethical awareness of her status as just one more woman in the catalogue of ‘allgemeiner weiblicher Mißbilligung.’ (272) The intensity of such moments of heightened experience, like Erika’s cutting herself, witnessing a sex act, or being raped, is assured insofar as the perceived missing emotion is reinstated through the lyrical possibilities of language itself, which however keeps itself critically distant from Erika. The text assumes a competence in the reader that may be thought of as the capacity to respond in a differentiated manner to these narrative modes functioning at the same time to induce laughter, outrage, and even (as we see in the Schubert motif) deep sadness.

Mahler-Bungers analyses Die Klavierspielerin in the first instance as a psychological ‘Krankengeschichte’, but at the same time her project undertakes to ‘rescue’ the text from the ‘eigentliche Intention [des] Textes, das Bild des Menschlichen in uns und damit uns selbst sadistisch zu zerstückeln’. (Mahler-Bungers, 90) Redemption, for Mahler-Bungers, is offered in the form of the Schubert intertexts, or more precisely in where they lead the reader, namely to a place outside the text and altogether far from its sadistic inscriptions. She calls for a reading of the text that recognises the potential for Trauer both in the character Erika and in the construction of the text as a philosophical and psychological representation of humanity. If this Trauer can be detected, says Mahler-Bungers, even if it remains concealed, potential, the text can be redeemed from
its own unbearably negative vision of the human condition. But what, exactly, is this Trauer? For Mahler-Bungers, following the Freudian model of psychosexual development, what Erika is missing is the castration complex as a culmination of a process of separation (of the child) from the libido object (the mother). Erika’s inability to love is in psychoanalytic terms indicative of the inability to grieve for the lost object. Mahler-Bungers claims that the text does contain the potential for Trauer, however subliminally, in the Schubert intertext that accompanies Erika on her ultimately unsuccessful quest for love beyond the mother. Drawing on the notion of the ‘Wegweiser’, she translates the wanderer’s experience of loss and self-deception (‘Ich suche im Schnee vergebens/Nach ihrer Tritte Spur’ (Fischer-Dieskau, 189)) and makes the assertion that the light which the wanderer sees, and requires to see to sustain the illusion of hope (the prerequisite for being a wanderer) represents in psychoanalytic terms the construction of a (longed-for but always imperfect) ‘Ich-Ideal’ which replaces the lost object (primary love for the mother) and thereby enables the coming-to-be of the autonomous subject. Mahler-Bungers’ reading reinstates Trauer and its partner, hope, into Jelinek’s narrative precisely by drawing on those parts of the Müller text that Jelinek does not use. In so doing, she reintroduces by implication ‘[e]ine Trauer, die der Text durch Auslassung so versteckt, daß der ungewollt doch von ihr spricht?! – Das “Winterreise”-Zitat, das Gedicht “Der Wegweiser”, obwohl im Kontext so verstümmelt, war beim näheren Hinsehen ein versteckter Wegweiser.’ (93) The premise of this interpretation rests on the significance of what is ‘versteckt’ or ‘verstümmelt’ in these citations, and the thesis finds its legitimacy not in the text, but outside it. So it owes a debt to Freud’s psychoanalytical model not only in its account of the pathology of the Erika figure, as well as in her reading of the Winterreise and how it bears on the text, but also in its formulation of a critique which takes its inspiration specifically from the structure of the text. That is, the reading takes its force from a belief that the process of
writing itself follows a grammatical pattern founded in psychoanalysis; the text betrays its real concern with *Trauer* precisely by omitting (repressing) it at every turn. In so doing, it has the effect ‘dass er ungewollt doch von ihr spricht’. (93) Her explanation of the structural gap left open with the refusal of *Trauer* in the text recalls Freud’s postulation of the unconscious as an explanation of the gaps in the logical and sequential psyche, which can be recognised through slips of the tongue, jokes, dreams etc., and which is usually repressed. The redemptive force that Mahler-Bungers locates in the Schubert intertext is thus ultimately part of the same discourse of immutability that characterises Erika’s life, and suggests that there might be a past and a future, symbolised respectively by nostalgia and hope, even if it cannot be attained in the text. As she says, ‘einen Text zu analysieren, den man eigentlich nicht libidinos besetzen kann, ist ein hartes, ein bitteres und ein masochistisches Unterfangen.’ (95)

Mahler-Bungers’ thesis makes an important point, namely that however great the narrative authority over the intertext, however brilliantly the author uses the intertext to corroborate the sovereignty of the new work (and Jelinek is clearly in control of her own text as a repertoire of effects), the intertext is also always a confirmation of the reader’s role in interrogating and challenging the narrative voice. However, her interpretation tends to give too much weight to the potential for grief in the psyche of the character Erika; in so doing, she does not account for the fact that the narrative insistently locates her in a context of social pathology, and makes her stand for an absolutely general and universal problematic. Marlies Janz criticises Mahler-Bungers for reclaiming what is not in the text, in particular the psychological depth that a psychoanalytic reading demands. (Janz, 84-6) She asks whether the ‘Wegschneiden’ of love and grief from Schubert’s original text is not rather directed towards a demonstration of Erika’s failure to nurture any capacity for human qualities (of grief). Rather than to reinstate the grief absent in the Schubert citation, and from this
standpoint argue that the Erika figure is driven by the loss of the father itself, she suggests that a psychoanalytic reading must take its lead from the prohibition of mourning for the absent father. Janz suggests that the intertext gives a cynical gloss to an actual reference to the loss of the father in the text, and argues that everything that could be psyche is, in being represented, turned inside out and transformed into a façade. This forecloses the possibility of true psychoanalysis, since the characters do not have an internal existence, a psyche, at all. I would agree with Janz that the text is essentially representative and therefore subsumes the interiority in which true psychoanalytic theory is grounded, but I would also suggest that the pathology that the 'psychoanalytic' discourse locates in Erika is exemplary not because it is peculiar to her but because it is representative of those hierarchical regulatory mechanisms to which all are subject: Erika is unique only insofar as the narrative has her centrally in its gaze. In this sense, the patterns of Erika’s relationship with her mother (and consequently with Klemmer), which does conform to a Freudian model of abnormality, would also seem to be the logical response to a society inspired and driven by power, and for which desire is an expression of sexuality that is intimately bound up with the social and economic implications of power. The issue of Erika’s melancholic condition is interesting from the point of view of the way in which it is formulated as yet another diagnostic intertext, but at a social, as opposed to individual psychological, level.

I would therefore prefer to approach the Schubert citations in the text from a somewhat different perspective, one that however shares with Mahler-Bungers the basic contention that they represent a redemptive force in the text, and that this redemptive force is generated in the reader’s response, namely the desire to reinstate an emotional element into the text. It seems to me that our concern should be with an analysis of our response to the narrative voice and in particular to the discourse of loss which a psychoanalytical reading would foreground. Hence those points at which the narrative
offers the reader space to respond to a self-consciously constructed narrative of unresolved (and hence melancholic) loss are definitive insofar as they offer an alternative aesthetic to that pessimistic stasis of the central character. In this respect, the integration of the Schubert intertexts into the text is paradigmatic of the way in which the structure of the text itself enables an enactment of an immutable condition whilst simultaneously resisting the universal entrapment it diagnoses. I would suggest therefore that neither Mahler-Bungers nor Janz grant the Schubert intertexts sufficient weight within the context of the narrative: Janz reads them as instances of an undifferentiated cynical narrative voice, whilst Mahler-Bungers articulates but does not explore her own sense of being ‘betroffen’ (91) as she recognises the citation. Surely the ‘Betroffenheit’ that such a citation induces goes to the very heart of what the intertextual mode sets out to do in this text as a whole? The Schubert motif – and the impact it has on us within this ugly environment – is an assurance of a capacity for emotional response, just as the ironic, satirical mode as a whole implicitly bespeaks a highly developed ethical critique. The radically unaccommodated self that Schubert’s wanderer represents is reflected ironically in the figure of Erika and her pretensions to individuality, but the lyrical force of his isolation is retained intact and becomes integrally part of the modulating narrative voice. I would contend that the Kafka citation at the end of the text effects a similar response: the prohibition of a tragic dimension to Erika and the absolute refusal to allow her to ‘make stories’ even in the context of the quasi-dramatic suicide attempt is articulated particularly forcefully in the negative intertextual rendition of the last moments of *Der Prozeß*:

Fenster blitzen im Licht. Ihre Flügel öffnen sich dieser Frau nicht. Sie öffnen sich nicht jedem. Kein guter Mensch, obwohl nach ihm gerufen wird. Viele wollen gerne helfen, doch sie tun es nicht. [...] Keiner legt eine Hand an sie, keiner nimmt etwas von ihr ab. [...] Das Messer soll ihr ins Herz fahren und sich dort drehen! Der Rest der dazu nötigen Kraft versagt, ihre Blicke fallen auf nichts, und ohne einen Aufschwung des Zorns, der Wut, der Leidenschaft sticht Erika Kohut sich in eine Stelle an ihrer Schulter, die sofort Blut hervorschießen läßt. [...] Die Welt steht, unverwundet, nicht still. (283)
Whereas Josef K. attains status at the end of Kafka's text, even if only as an anti-hero irresolutely facing his judgement, here 'die Frau' (Erika as everywoman) makes no real mark, leaves no impression: yet the citation and its implications are as forceful as Erika's own indecision and return home is not. The sheer absence of process here lends the last lines of the text an energy that is dialectically opposed to the hopeless circularity of Erika's continuing assent to her condition. Once more, it is the linguistic energy of the text that escapes the pessimism of its message.

**Stasis and transformation**

Jelinek's technique, and the responsibilities which it presents to the reader, are reminiscent of another political pessimist working in a different medium, Fassbinder, whose cinematic representations of class and sex politics and the response his work induces in an audience offer an interesting parallel to Jelinek's literary methodology. Fassbinder is an auteur who dwells upon the figure of the victim. In his films, individual agency is invariably shown either to be born of, or to succumb to, normative social structures that militate against the notion of self-determination. His characters are filmed in such a way as to emphasise the static nature of their existence, the camera fixing them in tableaux, or framing them for long moments in doorways and windows. The characters themselves often speak in an oddly stilted fashion, a technique that draws attention both to the social limitations imposed on them and to the representational basis of their performance on the screen. Fassbinder makes much of the ironic potential of the gap between the self-alienated characters and the reflecting audience, so encouraging in the audience an active consideration of his characters' essentially passive condition. Richard Dyer designates the ambiguity of Fassbinder's
political perspective as ‘left-wing melancholia’. The term is associated with Walter Benjamin in his description of Kastner’s poetry and the Neue Sachlichkeit, and refers broadly to a view of life that recognises the exploitative nature of capitalist society but cannot see a way in which fundamental change in this society can be brought about. The ‘melancholic’ quality of this view arises out of the notion that the working classes are not agents of historical change but victims of capitalism, and moreover, are complicit in their own oppression. This can also be employed in terms of sexual politics, where women and gays substitute the working class. In Dyer’s view, Fassbinder’s propensity to depict victims, especially his preference for women (according to Fassbinder, as well as being better equipped to express emotion, the image of the suffering woman is a powerful – even beautiful – cultural icon), does tend to place him in a visual and narrative rhetoric reinforcing a bourgeois patriarchal way of seeing, even if this does not mean that he himself condones this way of seeing. His vision is politically depressing, says Dyer, not just because it represents the oppressed as passive, complicit creatures, but also because it chooses to ignore all traditions of resistance and subversion that might bespeak the possibility of a process of change. Dyer quotes from Jack Babuscio on Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant in support of his suggestion that Fassbinder’s distanciation techniques come from a camp sensibility emphasising theatricality, artifice and ‘the ironic functions of style’. He makes the point that this camp might have allowed him to develop and make use of techniques hitherto ascribed solely to Brechtian theatre. In the final analysis, however problematic the actual films may be in their political despair, if they engender debate and provoke discussion of sexual/class politics then they can be redeemed as politically effective.

Much of this discussion could be directly applied to Jelinek. Her writing is fiercely political, fiercely critical of the effects of capitalism, and similarly she chooses to

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67 Richard Dyer, ‘Reading Fassbinder’s Sexual Politics’, in Fassbinder, ed. by Tony Rayns (London: British Film Institute, 1980), pp. 54-64 (pp. 55-6).
represent her critical stand by showing the victims as hopelessly ensnared in their social surroundings. Like Fassbinder, she can be accused of political melancholia, in that she represents the problem, but offers no solution. But Dyer's point that in representing characters as ugly and disgusting the film must assume humanity elsewhere (in the audience, he ventures) applies equally to Jelinek, for in giving her reader a narrative which shows in action, rather than tells authoritatively, the characters leading their brutal lives, she requires more of the reader than appreciation of the rhetoric. The reader is urgently required to recognise the brutality that is depicted and pass judgement on it. As such, the 'cruel' authorial or directorial gaze, taking pleasure in the suffering and ugliness in its focus, is very much an ethical one, placing faith in the reader's or audience's response. We might argue that just as Fassbinder creates filmic techniques which encircle and comment on the pessimistic narrative rhetoric of the film and its victims, so too Jelinek uses a specific literary technique whose effects do not so much enforce the radical pessimism (the melancholy) of the narrative, as provide the tools in the reader for a developing sensibility of the very oppression in which the characters and their victim status are seen to be complicit. So whilst the narrative enforces the continuing stasis of the social situation, it also provokes in the reader a growing and effective political awareness. The main tool for Jelinek is clearly irony, which is a constant reminder to the reader of her/his obligations to play an active role in the narrative, to be aware of her/his ultimate distance from the characters, especially Erika, in order to be able to finish reading with a sense of having been transformed in some way. The vision within is melancholic, hopeless, unenlightened, but the transformation comes about by way of the reader in dialogue with the pessimistic message of the text. The narrative then becomes effective, rather than melancholic. In the same way that Fassbinder gives his viewer space to debate with the events on screen, using quotational modes that refer us back to our own role in responding to what we see, Jelinek ensures
that we take up the position of knowing recipients of the text, and hence allows us to
respond to its pessimistic vision: thus it continues to hold out the possibility of a
beyond, cold comfort, perhaps, but nonetheless some sort of affirmation.

As a study of mechanisms of control, the thematic preoccupations of Die
Klavierspielerin are perfectly realised in the formal properties of the text. It has been
my intention to illustrate how the intertextual form is instrumental in articulating the
text’s subject, its dialectical push and pull allowing for the creation of a narrative mode
that is always at once ironically distant from and deeply involved in the cultural codes
of the society it depicts. I have traced the ironic narrative voice through the text, and
tried to show how the intertext, setting into motion processes of rejection and
reinstatement of discourses which play both on the reader’s susceptibility to and critical
apprehension of discursive patterns prevalent in Erika’s world, is involved in
maintaining the dialectical force of this narrative voice. The often ironic tensions which
Jelinek sets up with the quotational narrative mode inform the text, elucidating the
recycled patterns of power in which the characters are caught and in which they
unknowingly collude. The ironic intertext, which most clearly illuminates the condition
of Erika’s existence for the reader, also separates the reader from Erika, whilst retaining
for her or him the critical and unsettling link with the discourses (the repetitive,
insidious patterns of hierarchical power which they bespeak) used in the text. On the
one hand, the reader occupies a privileged position of knowing, of being alienated from
the characters. However, equally importantly, whilst this alienation gives her or him
critical leverage, s/he cannot be objective or disinterested, because the characters
themselves find their substantiability in a discourse of power and sexuality so universal
that it recalls each reader to the text; over the course of the narrative, the characters
attain the force of a particular excessive metaphorical instance of a quality of existence
which affects us all. And as metaphors for a malaise that is not contained within the
pages of the text, they cannot, as characters, compel our sympathy, nor are they supposed to.

This is, given the readerly urge to fill in and identify, a noteworthy achievement. It becomes remarkable when we consider that into *Die Klavierspielerin* Jelinek has placed the ultimate ironic intertext, her autobiography. In Erika Kohut, we are given a character with a name, address and profession offering satisfying parallels with her creator. Erika, like Jelinek, is an only daughter, and spends her childhood between Vienna and a second home in Styria. Both, through the course of their teenage years, suffer the effects of the father's deteriorating mental health and eventual death in a mental asylum (Jelinek's father died when she was in her early twenties) and both are subject to the mother's domineering presence, marked most clearly in her desire to enforce the potential for musical genius she sees in her daughter. In her protagonist Jelinek reproduces her own experience of a childhood steeped in an endless round of music lessons, and has her follow her own initial career at the Wiener Konservatorium. This is where their biographies eventually diverge: whilst Erika, unable to make the grade as a concert pianist, is relegated to the 'inferior' status of piano teacher, Jelinek herself does not pursue her musical studies, but turns to writing, out of which she has gradually made a successful and increasingly high-profile career.

Our understanding of Erika must inevitably be founded to some extent in the context of what we know of the author figure, Jelinek. Although we do not merge the two figures, the autobiographical element of the text is too strong to be irrelevant, and Jelinek herself encourages the connection. But the nature of the text prohibits us from reading the 'autobiography' as a set of explanatory facts about its subject; Jelinek radically rejects both traditional notions of autobiography as authentic self-expression.

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and self-representation, and the somewhat more recent attempts by women authors like Karin Struck to recoup the genre as the ultimate female expression of subjectivity. For Jelinek, the self is created as a discursive fiction, whose autonomy is not realised precisely because it never existed in the first place. In *Die Klavierspielerin*, autobiography has moved away from its traditional role, in which the individual is both assumed and celebrated in the self-crafted account of his or her life, and has become the most definitive means of showing the self, herself, as another product of her capitalist, bourgeois world, constructed in accordance with the societal law. If Jelinek’s writing seeks to construct the individual according to the processes by which she believes the individual in ‘real life’ to come about, in other words, as an entity radically constructed by its environment, then her use of autobiography as a presentational format in *Die Klavierspielerin* follows this notion to perhaps its absolute (and at the same time absolutely logical) conclusion: self-construction in the absence of all self-determination.

Typical of Jelinek is the way in which her use of her own biography connects with a traditional mode, autobiography, and simultaneously undermines (and effectively dispenses with) its founding and indispensable principle, the individual as ontologically distinct from other individuals. The frozen characters, with Erika/Elfriede as their central symbol, paradoxically inhabit a framework suggestive of the sense of time passing, development, progress, maturation and memory, all part of the autobiographical convention. The incongruity of the static characters in a text that in its format encourages the reader to prepare for dynamic significations of change and movement is only one of the ironies of Jelinek’s treatment of the autobiographical text. Its most ironic aspect, though, is that Jelinek herself clearly escapes the fate of her protagonist, and is as dynamic as her alter ego is static. In writing about the failure of creativity, she finds her own creative outlet and achieves the potential in a literary form denied to Erika in music. The divergence of their respective biographies occurs in and
because of the text. Thus, on the one hand, the text is a thematic study of failure and frustrated ambition, on the other a symbol of its author's remarkable success. Jelinek creatively escapes the failure of her central character and so transcends the limits of her own subject. Yet, however stylised the Erika/Elfriede figure may be and however distinct from that explosion of Geständnisliteratur in whose wake the text was published, Jelinek's autobiographical mode still constitutes a process of public self-exposure. This self-exposure is unsettling because, however ironically it is staged, it is nevertheless a directive to the reader to come close and inspect, and as such a discomforting form of submission: in Jelinek's words, 'ein gewisser Masochismus' expressed as 'ein starker Wunsch, sich selbst auch lächerlich zu machen, [...] sich selbst auch nicht zu schonen dabei.' (Bei, Wehowski, 5) The self-exposure (and Jelinek's freedom in discussing it in interview) adds a further dimension to the trajectory of power along which the narrative proceeds. The element of shame and embarrassment so central to the masochistic experience is reproduced, I would suggest, in the experience of reading, where the reader is literally shown 'too much'. This is, of course, partly the source of the text's humour for a reader faced with a breaking taboo: if we cannot look away, we laugh instead.

It seems appropriate to conclude on this note, since I want to stress emphatically the importance of laughter as a response, and am mindful that a critical analysis cannot do more than gesture inadequately towards its effect. Whilst one can consider how humour is set up in the text, breaking it down into its constitutive elements, like incongruity, irony, particular choices of words, etc., as I have done, its choreography as a whole is too complex to describe, because as a total experience it is also a radically individual affair. My reading has aimed to come to a better understanding of how the reader is both ensnared by the text's language and vision and simultaneously granted a critical perspective on it, whereby language can be thought to have become transformative as a
self-critical mode. I would argue that Jelinek achieves the transformative potential of language most consistently here by capturing the comic element of her subject and allowing us space to respond. Laughter is a form of relief from the text’s vision, as well as a reflexive mode of critique. As a text which, ideologically, is defined by its oppositional stance, its protest, its exposure of the negative in society, and which, furthermore, demands so much of its readership in capitulating to and realising this negative perspective, Die Klavierspielerin nonetheless finds a narrative mode which absurdly, grotesquely, ironically and consistently recalls the human potential for laughter. Laughter is the vehicle for Jelinek’s critique, the means by which we are persuaded to take the bitter medicine she serves up, and even smack our lips with enjoyment as we swallow.
Günter Grass’s *Ein weites Feld*

1. The double focus: intersecting modes of fiction and reality

Since Ulrich Plenzdorf’s bold reconditioning of Werther as a disaffected young East German in 1973, no text in German has earned the epithet ‘intertextual’ so thoroughly as Günter Grass’s *Ein weites Feld.* The intertextual mode, in the form of a biographical and literary invocation of Theodor Fontane, is the text’s governing principle, a hugely ambitious, not to say audacious authorial task that the new text has to work to legitimate. Given the size and scope of *Ein weites Feld,* and the centrality of the figure of Fontane within it, the intertextual mode cannot be accommodated as a literary game of references alone, even if this is also demonstrably the case. It must be shown to bear its own, original fruit in the new text, beyond being an – albeit impressive – archival exercise. Most readers and critics, I suggest, almost universally begin the process of deciphering the central character, Fonty, with a certain bewilderment, and would inevitably ask why Fontane is so predominant a figure, both from the point of view of his own historical, literary significance, and the importance which Grass has clearly attached to him in this modern context. What, we might be forgiven for asking of the text, does Fontane actually represent? What is his precise role in the construction of Fonty? And, most importantly, what are the implications, literary and political, of the intertextual tension that his presence in the text unquestionably provokes in the reader? These questions need to be addressed fully and fairly, especially because the text was mired in controversy from the outset, and has found notoriety as much for the manner of its reception as for the grandeur, flawed or otherwise, of its intertextual project. Latter critiques of the text have inevitably had to negotiate the issue of the text’s publication,

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70 Grass had a researcher, Dieter Stolz, working in the *Fontane Archiv* in order to ensure anonymity before and during the writing process. The two discuss the collaboration during an interview with Claus-Ulrich Bielefeld, ‘Der Autor und sein verdeckter Vermittler’, in *Der Autor als fragwürdiger Zeuge,* ed. by Daniela Hermes (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), pp. 247-87.
an event that quickly expanded into a much bigger debate as to the role of the critic, the nature of criticism itself and, as well, the issue of literature’s legitimacy as a mouthpiece of political thought. It is not my intention to detail this debate: the text itself slips out of sight all too quickly as the forum for bitter attacks on Grass’s politics, not to mention for discussions of media issues of marketing and sales, all of which has in any case been extensively documented and analysed. What I am concerned to do, in the following discussion, is to give an account of the part played by intertext in generating a political critique in a fictional environment that is overtly, overwhelmingly literary in nature, and thereby to further discussion of those issues which, although broadly speaking responsible for the initial critical furore, have only in retrospect become established as the proper focus for critical responses to the text.

Many critics initially found fault with Grass’s use of the Fontane intertext on the basis that it served as a device merely to establish implausible connections between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, historical liberty taking of the worst kind. This seems to me to be a fundamental misapprehension of the intertextual aesthetic and its function in Ein weites Feld, not least as such an approach takes no account of the particular property of intertext in the environment of the new text: surely, such a heavy intertextual debt as we have here challenges us to do more than seek parallels or comparisons? Certainly, the reader, taken back and forth between the two centuries and the two ‘characters’, the historical Fontane and the fictional Theo Wuttke, is asked to commit to an historical understanding of the text. But the intertextual mode articulates a

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wider concern, namely the function of fiction in debating history and our response to it, and more specifically the question of whether the power of fiction might ultimately prove itself more than the power of a notional, historical reality. It is in the intertextual configuring of Fonty where the novel’s historical weight most readily seeks to join forces with its contemporary political critique, and, furthermore, where the intersection of fiction and reality is most completely realised. The Fonty/Fontane figure has to be considered as both on the one hand a derivation of reality, of historical fact (the Fontane Archiv as the narrative mouthpiece emphasises the role of documentary evidence in the painstaking reconstruction of history as ‘truth’), and on the other as an instance of fiction, freely reconstructed by Grass as a literary project. The duality at the heart of the central character, so constructed as to refuse historical specificity as well as a singular identity, gives a double edge to the narrative that the reader, steeped in the whole replicating aesthetic of the text, is required to hold in focus. This aesthetic requires the reader not only to see in relation ‘now and then’, Fontane and Fonty, the original German unification and the reunification, and so on, but also to consider the text as a dialogue between the concepts of fiction and reality, played out by way of the layers of historical intertext. The text’s historical awareness offers a critical purchase on our own time, as well as functioning as a comparative backdrop. Often the interplay between the old and the new (expressed in the movement between the two centuries) eventually reveals itself more precisely to be both an expression of historical fluidity and, by the same token, of the possibilities which this notion lends to a fictionalised account of historical and personal identity.

Whilst the historical dimension of the text calls out for critical attention, it seems to me that this dimension can only properly be understood within the context of the intertextual patternings themselves. That is to say, history (and Grass’s use of it) comes into focus as a consequence of the structural doublings that characterise the text on all
levels. For this reason, I have chosen to structure my own discussion of the text in two parts. Firstly, I shall consider the narrative workings of the text, its doubling strategies, its literary games, its wholly intertextual constitution. With this as a basis, I shall then explore its historical aspect and the movement between past and present that the intertextual voice permits. In this way, the critical emphasis should remain, rightly, on the dynamics of the intertext within a fictional text, and historical and political concerns viewed through this all-important lens. I would like to begin my discussion of the intertextual mode and its role in debating those issues I have sketched out above with an analysis of the puzzling protagonist Fonty, whose inherent slipperiness perfectly captures the complexities of the text as a whole.

Literary doublings: Fonty and Hofstaller

From the start, biographical references to Fontane’s correspondence with his friend Georg Friedlaender and to his daughter Mete establish the link between Wuttke and the Prussian author. Prompted by the coincidence of his birth date and birthplace, Wuttke has dedicated his life to reflecting ‘die Mühsal einer verkrachten Existenz’ (9), and his ‘Nachleben’ is so convincing ‘dab er in dieser und jener Plauderrunde als Urheber auftreten konnte’. (9) Beginning with his ‘coincidental’ birth one hundred years to the day after Fontane, Fonty goes on to enact a biography that has already been realised, and that has already been set out and preserved for posterity in letters and documents. This biography can briefly be sketched out thus: born on 30 December 1819 in Neuruppin, Fontane’s interest in literature and culture is established from an early age. His marriage to Emilie Rouanet-Kummer produces four children, George, Theodor, Martha (Mete) and Friedrich, but he is already the father of two illegitimate children. During the Franco-Prussian war, Fontane goes to France as a war correspondent, and is taken captive for three months. His interest in England, and his three journeys there, is
the inspiration for his early literary output (most important from this time are *Aus England: Jenseit des Tweed*, 1860, and *Balladen*, 1861), but his name is made (at a relatively late age) from his impressions of his homeland, entitled *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg*. In 1878 he begins his career as a writer of fiction, and, apart from a break due to illness (when, on the advice of his doctor, he replaces his fiction by an autobiographical account entitled *Meine Kinderjahre*), continues to write and publish prolifically until his death in 1898. As the supreme chronicler of Wilhelmine Berlin (texts such as *Irrungen, Wirrungen* can usefully be read with a street map to hand), Fontane is the acceptable face of Prussianism, observing and gently rueing the downfall of his protagonists as they fall victim to its iron fist.

This unemphatic, understated stance is exactly that taken by his alter ego Fonty. Sometimes by chance, sometimes intentionally, Fonty is always beholden to this other biography, living an entirely retrospective existence and inhabiting, often literally, a different voice. As the narrative voice quickly suggests, this is on the one hand a very conscious act on Fonty’s part, requiring practice and a good deal of hard work and study. It is also, however, a phenomenon that goes into a fictional realm far beyond Fonty’s own often playful recollections of Fontane: the biographical doubling extends into a narrative game which interweaves the characters so effectively that it leaves the reader struggling to distinguish the two figures. Thus, the narrative, initially informing us that Fonty, inspired by the happy accident of his birth, is ‘copying’ the great Fontane, gradually reveals its own doubling strategy. Beyond Fonty himself, and his own efforts to recreate his literary hero, the insistence on marking the parallels, the care with which the similarities are presented, ensure that those coincidences which could conceivably be thought of as within the bounds of possibility are given an altogether different emphasis in an intertextually self-conscious narrative context. Furthermore, it is the

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72 For a fuller account of Fontane’s life and works, see Charlotte Jolles, *Fontane und die Politik: ein Beitrag zur Wesensbestimmung Theodor Fontanes* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1983).
combination of these two, namely the 'real' (the events of Fonty's life 1989-91, described by an innocent, collective narrator, which will include referentially his deliberate embrace of Fontane and his — equally real — idiosyncrasies) with the 'fictional' (the thoroughgoing double perspective created by the narrative as a structural whole), which assaults the reader. Fonty is the central character in the text, but as a central character he is oblique, displaced by the strength of the intertext through which the narrative articulates him. The co-existence of narrative realism, embodied by the often frustratingly stupid narrators who take Fonty at face value, and an extraordinary self-conscious textuality, with the narrative constantly indicating its own status as fiction, ensures that the reader be, at the very least, alert to the interplay between these two modes. The relationship between them lends the text a narrative perspective that is at once authoritative (historically and topographically grounded, solid and self-confident) and whimsical (intertextually non-committal, diffident and ironic). From the vantage point of old age, Fonty's perspective (and, equally, the perspective of those around him who have narrative command over his biography) takes on a monumentally historical quality, further extended by the nineteenth century Fontane intertext. It is no coincidence that Fonty is created as an old man: in its homage to Fontane, the narrative reflects a tendency to picture the author in his later, productively literary years. Equally, from a more textual, structural perspective, the retrospective aesthetic permits that mode of reflection in which the present finds its momentum. And yet the intertextual mode is also self-consciously ironic in nature, holding the characters in a constant textual position of interdependence and insubstantiality. The purchase of the monumental perspective is, in other words, always only relative to the shifting referential ground of the text itself. Within this intertextual environment the characters and events are not subject to the logic of time as a progression from past to present to future: temporality unfolds in an altogether more complex manner.
Both Fonty and his shadowy companion, a spy in the employ of the Geheimdienst, are themselves thematic instances of timelessness, of course, Fonty as ‘der Unsterbliche’, Hofstaller as the eternal spy, resuscitated from his former incarnation in Hans Joachim Schädlich’s Tallhover. Their endless perambulations around the streets and parks of Berlin establish them equally as spatial and as temporal inhabitants of the city. They are conceived in portrait form, a singular presence in constant motion through the topography of the changing face of Berlin. They quickly attain a status somewhere between icon and caricature, ‘Klein und Groß’ (12), ‘lang und schmal neben breit und kurz’ (12), ‘der eine bei ausholendem Schritt, der andere im Tippelschritt’ (13), contrasting in every respect, but captured early on in the narrative as an overwhelmingly physical unity. They are ‘verschmolzen zu einer immer größer werdenden Einheit’ (12), ‘miteinander verwachsen und von einer Gestalt’ (13), ‘ein Doppelporträt’ (16), they cast ‘einen gepaarten Schatten’ (17), are ‘Mantel mit Mantel zu einem Schattenriß verwebt, obgleich sie nicht Arm in Arm gingen’ (21), and, although the image dissolves when they stop moving, ‘[i]ndem sie gingen, wurden sie wieder zum Paar. Beide Mäntel miteinander verwebt.’ (44) The image of them is iterated in self-consciously artistic terms. The men are twice a ‘Stummfilm’ (13,21) (Laurel and Hardy come irresistibly to mind), and as they peer through a gap in the wall, the narrator comments that ‘[w]äre aus östlichem Bedürfnis noch immer ein Grenzsoldat wachsam gewesen, hätte er von beiden ein erkennungsdienstliches Photo schießen können.’ (15) They are narrated as if they were being painted in a single portrait, picture, or sketch, as a ‘leicht zapplige Schattenrißbildchen’ (13), ‘wie gerahmt:

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73 Hans Joachim Schädlich, Tallhover (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1986).
74 See Michael Ewert, ‘Spaziergänge durch die deutsche Geschichte: Ein weites Feld von Günter Grass’, Sprache im technischen Zeitalter, 37 (1999), 402-17. For Ewert, the ‘Spaziergang’ is a literary device to link time and space, and is also indicative of a certain freedom of thought: ‘[d]er Spaziergänger] wählt seine eigenen Wege und löst sich so vom Gewohnten. Seine Abschweifungen widersetzen sich allen Denk- und Utopieverboten und holen Geschichte zurück in die Kompetenz der Subjekte.’ (p. 413)
The statuesque Fonty and his squat sidekick Hoftaller are a literary duo reminiscent of Don Quixote and the ever-faithful Sancho Panza, minus their steeds but possessed of the same eccentric, picaresque spirit. Their somewhat ludicrous adventures over the course of the text invest them with an irresistibly comic element, and Fonty follows Quixote in the tradition of the madman-seer. However, the comparison should not be overstretched: Fonty’s ‘outsider’ status is equivocal, to say the least, and Grass’s indulgence of his hero is, as I will discuss later, problematic. And Hoftaller, like Panza, the voice of reason, is equally close to Mephistopheles, blackmailing his charge even as he guides him safely through the political minefields of German history. The echoes of other literary pairings is, though, part of the process by which they gain status as intertextual instances, quotations from a cultural heritage that ranges from Cervantes, through Thomas Mann to Carol Reed (their final meeting pays homage to The Third Man, as they take to the big wheel for a clandestine ‘denouement’ — although Grass deliberately keeps Reed’s cinematic drama out of the scene by having Hoftaller relate it second hand). The visual portrayal of the two men thus has everything to do with their characterisation as intertextual configurations, interlinked with one another and with their respective literary/historical counterparts. They take shape as memory: their own, the narrators’ and the reader’s, and crucially, we visualise them together. The notion of two entities that belong together is central to the strategies of duplicity with which the text works.

The fact that Hoftaller ‘sah nach nichts oder beliebig aus’ (45) is consistent with his shadowy existence as a spy. Fonty himself wryly comments that ‘Sie sind uns leider auf keinem Blatt erhalten. Kann jedoch sein, daß man Ihresgleichen aus den Skizzenbüchern heraussortiert hat. Spuren verwischen. Verdeckt bleiben. Abtauchen,

75 See Gerd Labroisse, ‘Zur Sprachbildlichkeit in Günter Grass’ Ein weites Feld, Amsterdamer Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik, 45 (1999), 347-79 (pp. 351-4). Labroisse discusses the ‘bildhaft’ representation of the central characters and of the text as a whole, and suggests that its filmic and pictorial narrative methodology obscures, rather than illuminates, its political vision.
ganz Ihre Methode.’ (38) (Later, we shall see how this is also Fonty’s technique: the motif of the ‘Haubentaucher’ foreshadows his own eventual disappearance.) Hoftaller is constructed overtly in accordance with his predecessor: ‘[… ] da uns Tallhovers Biograph nichts Zitierbares in die Hand gegeben, nicht einmal ein Phantombild geliefert hat, können wir nur hoffen, daß mit Fontys Gesamterscheinung auch dessen Tagundnachtschatten ins Bild kommt, zumindest andeutungsweise.’ (48) Fonty, likewise, owes his description to portraits of Fontane: he comes into physical being as a ‘Konterfei’, a citation. The figure of Fonty is, for the swooning narrators, not a replication of an original, but its continuation: ‘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.’ (45) In narrative terms, the notion of ‘Unsterblichkeit’ is a semantic one, a directing principle emerging out of the intertextual voice. The narrators, groping for an adequate description of Theo Wuttke and slavishly in thrall to the Fontane figure around which their lives revolve, appropriately find their voice in a citation:

So sahen wir Theo Wuttke. Und Julius Rodenberg […] notierte an anderer Stelle: “Er macht noch ganz, trotz des greisen Schnurrbartes, den jünglingshaften Eindruck, unter dem er fortleben wird...”
Hier ist Unsterblichkeit direkt angesprochen; und Fonty hat das Fortleben wie ein Programm durchexerziert. Deshalb nahmen wir ihn nicht nur beim geplauderten und über Seiten und Verskolonnen hinweg zitatseligen Wort, sondern ließen uns überdies von seinem Anblick zu dem Glauben hinreißen: Er täuscht nicht vor. Er steht dafür. Er lebt fort. (48)

The reader is thus presented with not only an intertextually divisive central figure, but also a divided narrative position. On the one hand, faced with the sight of Fonty, the narrators (self-proclaimed ‘Fußnotensklaven’ (12)) are carried along by their own willing suspension of disbelief, along with ‘alle[n] anderen [...]”, selbst wenn sie versuchten, mit üblicher Anrede – “Na, Fonty, wieder mal unterwegs?” – in ironische Distanz zu flüchten.’ (49) The reader, then, is invited gently to mock the narrators’ all-consuming desire to approach Fontane through any means possible, even if it gives
them an air of ludicrous desperation, and in this sense, the narrative voice as a whole concedes a distance between the narrators and the reader. On the other hand, its own pervasive intertextual methodology works along the very same continuum, making it impossible for Fonty to exist as a self-contained figure in our imagination. The ironic distance that the narrators fail to attain is not one that we are allowed either, for Fonty simply reflects the narrative processes themselves.

I hope that, in this initial account of the central figures, I have shown how the intertextual movement between the two centuries invites us to reflect on much more than the historical parallels that it does also set up. The intertextual voice, central to which is Fonty himself as an instance of pure intertext, functions more broadly as a textual resistance to closure: in its myriad doublings, the text introduces something of a mirror effect, where everything is reflected and re-reflected for the reader. Within the context of the contemporary events of the text (1989-91), the 'weites Feld' can best be described as a radically open fictional field of significations that is too broad to be brought into focus. In respect of the rapidly approaching political enactment of unity, the structural mode of inconclusiveness asserted by the exhaustive intertextual inscriptions implies a political message of resistance to closure. This is something that I shall discuss in more depth later, but I feel it is important to draw attention to the political dimension of Grass's intertextual meanderings at this stage. The intersection between literature and politics is, after all, the thematic basis of the text, and one of the reasons why the author Fontane offered Grass such a suggestive point of departure. In Fontane, aside from the figure of the chronicler, picked up in the discursive, reflective modes of the new text, Grass sees a politically problematic figure with a thoroughly ambiguous biography that he makes full use of in the modern context. Moreover, the process whereby a real figure, based in historical fact, is brought to bear as a fictional idea is fundamental in problematising that history and challenging its cultural and
political legacy. A fictionalised account of history and personal identity, as we see it here, indicates an alternative to the documentary methodology of records and archives that limits the vision of the archivists. The literary account is a type of envisioning of the past, whereby documented events are brought into critical confrontation with a fictional mode that, in its imaginative and performative role, interrogates the ‘real’ world and its representation. I would like to consider the narrative relation of the fictional and the real in some detail now, by looking at a key episode in the text: Fonty’s journey to his birthplace Neuruppin, and the subsequent description of his meeting with Uwe Johnson.

**Reading I: Neuruppin and the critique of the GDR**

The purpose of the journey is to visit the monument to Fontane already referred to as the ‘ganzfigürliche[r] Monument, vor dem [Fonty] als Kind oft allein und manchmal an des Vaters Hand gestanden hatte’. (9) On arriving, Fonty, first encouraged and then exhorted by Hoftaller, climbs up onto the plinth in order that his physical likeness to Fontane might better be assessed. The episode begins painfully; Fonty is embarrassed, and from the reader’s perspective there seems little justification in subjecting the central character to a somewhat obvious comparison:


However, despite his initial discomfort, and despite the disparaging comments of the narrators and Hoftaller’s disappointment, Fonty is not subsumed under the ‘original’. Instead, the primacy of the statue is comically undermined with the narrative observation that the model for it was not Fontane at all, but one of his sons, and furthermore, not Friedrich, who, as his father’s publisher, at least can lay claim to some bookish connection to his father, but ‘der Intendantur-Assessor, dann Intendanturrat,
später Vortragender Rat, Korpsintendant, schließlich Wirklicher Geheimer Kriegsrat’, with the resultant effect that ‘[d]er ganze Kerl stecke im Leihkostüm.’ (594) As Fonty gains confidence on his impromptu podium, his Fontane performance proves an opportunity to rail against the conditions under which he himself has laboured to make something out of his career under socialist rule. Fonty at this point reveals himself as a clear-sighted and bitter critic of the system whose passing he also mourns, and of its principal servants, the spies who, in the form of Hoftaller, ironically constitute his only audience. Crucially, ‘Fonty hatte seinen Ton gefunden’ (598):

Wer hat unser sozialistisches Vaterland wie eine geschlossene Anstalt gesichert und den Schriftstellern obendrein, sobald sie auftauchten, den Kantschen Zynismus als kategorischen Imperative getrichtert? Sie waren das, vielgestalt Sie! In immer größerer Erfolgsauflage: Sie, Sie und Sie. (598)

The performance is, then, in its essence a very contemporary political critique of the way in which authors and artists such as Wolf Biermann and Christa Wolf have been restricted in the GDR. The scene presents Fonty in one of his most visceral moments, for once giving the reader confirmation of the rhetorical skills for which he is vaunted, and also some idea of why, as a citizen of the GDR who has shown himself willing to distance himself vocally from state ideology, he has been the subject of suspicion and subsequent invigilation. Fonty, though not ever able to resist the demands of the blackmailing Hoftaller, does here let it be known how bitterly he resents the shadowing campaigns that he and ‘fellow’ cultural voices of the GDR (the real authors, singers etc. who have been persecuted and silenced) have fallen victim to, at the hands of all the Hoftallers who follow them. The speech substantiates Fonty as a political voice overtly critical of the state apparatus and its treatment of intellectuals, and is one of the many points in the text where a critical perspective is evident. Clearly, one of the main charges against Grass, that the text idealised a state that was committing crimes against its people, does not take account of the critical stance adopted at these points, even if it is ultimately compromised by Fonty’s own capitulation. Lutz Kube, in an article about
the role of writers in the text, discusses this issue at length, and points to moments such as this one as evidence of a dissenting voice that co-exists with Fonty’s more positive, and much criticised, conceptualisation of the GDR as ‘einer kommoden Diktatur’. (324-5) Lutz Kube suggests that the text, exploring the central role of the Geheimdienst in the relationship between state and individual, constitutes a plea for a differentiated approach to the question of the guilt of intellectuals under the regime.

However substantial the political voice is here, it is still subject to the intertexting of the narrative as a whole. Although Fonty has found his voice, he is as ever bound to the figure from whose plinth he speaks, using Fontane’s essay ‘Die gesellschaftliche Stellung der Schriftsteller’ (published anonymously in 1891) as a framework for his scathing critique. The modern political situation is thus mediated through another political age, the invocation of Prussian authors struggling against censorship acting as a relativising device: the GDR is not unique in its actions, but draws on and reflects a history of intellectual censorship. The integration of Fontane’s essay into Fonty’s critique functions as a reminder that apparent changes are often superficial, something that Fonty himself cynically points out at the end of his impassioned declamation: ‘[d]eshalb sollte der Aufsatz von dazumal nunmehr ‘Die gesellschaftliche Stellung beschatteter Schriftsteller’ heißen, denn seitdem hat sich einiges verändert, doch nichts im Prinzip.’ (599) The historical parallel that the intertext permits is thus also a symptomatic gesture of resignation, the implications of which I shall discuss later. Yet the persuasiveness of Fonty’s own performance, as a fictionalised recapitulation of an existing piece of Fontane’s critical assessment, is the means by which the political energy is generated: the ironic intertext, with the fictional Fonty declaiming from the plinth of his real and utterly solid alter ego (made of bronze, and literally larger than life), both points to the figure of Fonty as fiction and affirms its – fictional – substance.

in the new text. And it is no coincidence, I think, that the very point where Fonty is substantiated politically is also the site at which his lack of substance, his essentially fictional nature, is most prominently advertised, with the arrival of Grass himself onto the scene.

The brief cameo appearance of the author, couched in a gently self-mocking tone, gives the narrative another opportunity to debunk, as it were, its own authoritative position. Fonty has clambered onto the plinth and, striking up the pose adopted by the Fontane statue, fulfilled Hoftaller's wishes and effectively brought the episode to a natural conclusion. However, it is at this point that Grass and his wife stumble 'by chance' into the text and onto the scene and wrest the initiative away from the narrators: '[e]ine Idee, die uns hätte kommen sollen, wurde von einem Paar realisiert, das, ohne Rücksicht auf die gestellte Szene, nun in unseren Bericht einbricht: Störend und doch wie selbstverständlich kamen sie dem erzählten Verlauf dazwischen, sozusagen ein Intermezzo lang.' (591) Their cameo, in fact, does not so much interrupt the narrative as relocate it in another, more self-consciously wrought narrative frame. They are instantly recognisable as Grass and his wife, and in this respect their entrance does bring the 'actual' narrative up short, as the narrators themselves resignedly point out. Nonetheless, they do not significantly alter the pattern of the narrative, not least because their entrance into the text is dependent on their undergoing a transformation into fiction. They are conditioned by the text as much as any other character, even whilst their intrusion sends a distinctly postmodern wink to the reader. Grass writes himself and his wife into the text as caricatures of themselves; he unmistakable in beret, with thrusting posture, pipe and 'hängende[m] Schnauz' (591), she tall, gothic and long haired, and the pair comically prosaic as they set about recording the details of the statue on film for Grass's research. Grass issues commands and criticises his wife as she photographs (when the wind blows her hair in front of the lens, he grumbles '[d]as
kommt, weil du keinen Hut tragen willst, nicht mal ne Mütze' (591)); she simply tells him to ‘[p]äß auf mit der Asche’. (592) The grand and mystic process of preparing the text is gently sent up in the portrait of the artist at work here. But more importantly, having undergone this metamorphosis into fiction, the Grass pair have given up their claim to reality as a purely extratextual quality, and are now linked by way of the text with the ‘proper’ fictional characters. In giving himself up, as it were, to fiction and its demands, Grass has subjected himself to the same doubling device as the other characters, and used the cameo as a confirmation of the dialectical intertextual aesthetic of the text. Within the text itself, Günter and Ute Grass, unmistakably themselves, utterly, convincingly ‘real’ though they are (no doubt this trip to Neuruppin did occur precisely as Grass has depicted it), paradoxically confirm the primacy of fiction, because they themselves, in all their plausibility, can only momentarily dislodge the established characters from the centre of the narrative. Hoftaller refers to them as ‘Touristen’ (593), and from a textual point of view, this is also what they are.

When the narrators eavesdrop on Grass playfully reconstructing that Fontane-Ton already made so familiar in the text by Fonty’s patterns of speech, the cameo demonstrates its own ironic contribution to the intertext; the actual author, now himself rendered half-fictional, is shown imagining what the reader already takes for granted in Fonty, the fully fledged fictional character: ‘“[b]eißt sich kolossal, hätte unser Freund da oben gesagt.”’ (591) The use of the conditional tense here ironically prevents ‘Grass’ from sharing in the intimate dialogic understanding already established as a fully functioning and resonant intertext between Fonty and his alter ego Fontane. The interaction between ‘Grass’ and Fonty, on the other hand, is virtually nonexistent: ‘Fonty saß wie in Erz gegossen; auch Hoftaller stand samt Zigarre versteinert. Das Paar jedoch wollte weder den Tagundnachtschatten im Vorfeld des Denkmals noch das als Double erhöht sitzende Objekt wahrnehmen. Beide waren ihnen Luft.’ (591) And later,
Hoftaller congratulates Fonty on his reaction to them: "[l]abelhaft, wie Sie diese Touristen ignoriert haben. Sind wie ne Landplage. Müssen alles photographieren, doch genau hingucken, das schaffen die nie." (593) Only after Fonty has made his impassioned speech about literature and censorship, and only after the two old men have left, does the figure Grass display any awareness of their existence: '[d]ann wollte es der Zufall oder die Laune höherer Regie, daß noch einmal jenes touristische Paar, er mit Pfeife, sie mit Photoapparat, vor dem Denkmal aufkreuzte, als sei noch nicht alles geknipst. "Irgendwas fehlt!" rief er. Doch sie sagte: "Seh ich nicht. Du bildest dir wieder was ein."") (600)

The cameo, then, explicates a central concern of the text, namely the intersection between fiction and reality, and the way in which these two can become so linked as to be indistinguishable. In this episode, the idea is bandied about as a light-hearted game with the reader, and provides Grass with a perfect opportunity to parody himself and his own writing. Equally though, the fact/fiction dialectic, represented here in its ultimate, ironic manifestation as the author’s confrontation with his creation, suggests a profound concern with the implications, literary and political, of a mode of representation that allows fiction to become indistinguishable from fact and that therefore, in using fiction to challenge the very premises on which fact rests, seeks to engender a more proximate representation of the truth. Here, typically, layer upon layer of text means that the authenticity of even that which is most innocently ‘real’ is thrown into question, and what is presumed ‘fictional’ is shown to be bound hand and foot to the real. So, the statue of Fontane is revealed not just to be a representation, but a substitute representation, using another figure; Fonty and Hoftaller are fictional inventions but not contained to the text, both having a ‘real’ dimension (Fonty’s being the historical Fontane, Hoftaller’s being his status as eternal spy); and Grass and his wife are drawn into the text as fictional figures, but whilst they lose their basis in reality, they do not
become privy to the other world, remaining obstinately blind to its rules and possibilities. The author Grass, as he appears in the text, is ironically unable to keep pace with the fictional suggestiveness of his own creation, towards which he can only vaguely motion. His indelicate intrusion, as well as drawing the reader’s attention to the fictional basis of the scene and the characters who inhabit it, also generates a sense of fiction’s ability to resonate beyond the actual process of its creation.  

Whilst the narrators reveal themselves, as usual somewhat turgidly, to be engrossed in the question of the relationship between fiction and reality as an ultimately theoretical problem, the text itself is an extemporised attempt to make this dialectic work, in practice, to produce something in fiction that nonetheless pertains to the ‘truth’. Fonty’s tendency, ‘was ihm nicht paßte, zu übersehen und tatsächliche Lücken mit den Kindern seiner Laune aufzufüllen’ (592) is a reflection on those modes of signification which make up the text’s representational modes: in place of a rigid account of how things were or are, the indirect narrative suggests, prompts, and so is able implicitly to call to account the many dark events it represents and, perhaps more importantly still, its own role in imagining them.

Grass is not the only author whose appearance in the text might be said to dramatise this preoccupation. So too does the cameo appearance of Uwe Johnson, in an arranged meeting with Fonty at the same place and directly after Grass himself has made his unremarkable exit. As so often in this text, the act of writing itself is foregrounded, with Fonty recollecting and recounting the episode in a characteristically rhetorical letter to

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77 See Grass interview ed by Bielefeld in Hermes, ed.: ‘[w]enn fiktive Figuren auf dem Papier entworfen sind und sich vom Papier zu lösen beginnen, lebendig werden, fordern sie ihr eigenes Recht heraus. Sie gehen dann Wege, die der Autor vielleicht mit List steuern kann, damit sie ihm nicht entlaufen, aber ein regelrechter Widerspruch gegen die dann frei handelnde, fiktive Figur würde gewiß beim Autor zum Schreibstopp führen.’ (p. 277) Later, he refers to his own appearance in the text to illustrate his understanding of this process as something not entirely of his own making: ‘[a]uch beim ‘Weiten Feld’ ist es natürlich so, daß sich bestimmte Dinge aus dem einmal entworfenen Geflecht ergeben. […] Da [in this case the author’s cameo] – die vom Erzähler beschriebene, von Fonty mit gemischten Gefühlen ausgefüllte Lücke des Denkmals macht es möglich – kann plötzlich so etwas wie die Erweiterung der Fiktion geschehen.’ (p. 278)
his daughter Martha. Like Fontane, this second figure from the non-fictional world is, of course, eminently a maker of fictions. The narrative makes no concession to the gap between the fictional character and the real one: Johnson is fully integrated into the particular literary reality of Fonty's world. The meeting between Fonty and Johnson has been arranged through a mutual acquaintance at the Academy, suggesting that the two are coming together as equals, and confirmed in the ensuing conversation, which is held in a spirit of professional equality and mutual respect. The episode is on the one hand clearly a simple tribute to Johnson as a friend and colleague. Yet his presence also formalises textual and thematic concerns with which *Ein weites Feld* is principally engaged: firstly, his obsession with the question of reality and how to reflect it, and secondly his dedication to representing a divided Germany (*Mutmaßungen über Jakob* (1959), *Das dritte Buch über Achim* (1961)) and the condition of exile (*Jahrestage* (1970, 1971, 1973, 1983)). Grass, commenting on his own ‘genauen Darstellungsweise’ in a discussion about his text, aligns himself with ‘einen Zola, der monatelang auf der französischen Eisenbahn mit Lokomotiven herumfährt, […]', der da dort Eisenbahnen eine die Handlung beherrschende Rolle spielen’ (Hermes, ed., 268-9); the attention to detail for which Johnson, too, was famed. According to Grass, discussing Johnson’s appearance in his own text, they share ‘ein handwerkliches Verständnis von Literatur,’ founded in the ‘Wechselspiel von Imagination und Genauigkeit.’ According to Christine Ivanovic, though, the episode more than anything qualifies the aesthetic differences between the two authors. Her exposition and contextualisation of Johnson’s role in the text leads her to conclude that Grass differs from Johnson in that he creates an ‘epische Fiktion, die allein in ihrer offengelegten Konstruiertheit eine Aussage zur Geschichte abgeben kann, nicht zu deren einzelnen Details, sondern zu

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78 Hermes, ed., p. 270. The comment is preceded by a discussion of how the text was researched, in which Grass’s concern to record details with as much accuracy as possible (even the price of the BigMac is, at time of going to press, correct) is reminiscent of the other author.

deren typischem Verlauf, deren typischen Verlusten.' (194) In this respect, Grass’s ‘Wirklichkeit’ is far removed from Johnson’s own ‘Wahrheitsfindung’, insofar as ‘Grass zielt in seiner Darstellung nicht wie Johnson auf den Gesprächsgegenstand selbst, die richtige ästhetische Position, die richtige moralische Haltung. Ihm geht es um das Reden über den Gegenstand, in dem der Einzelne sich erkennt, wiedererkennt, in dem der Gegenstand dem Leser erkennbar wird.’ (194-5) It seems to me that her assessment goes to the heart of Grass’s discursive methodology in this text, with Fonty the supreme embodiment of the quotational, indirect mode in which it operates.

The pretext for the meeting between the two is, of course, a common interest in Fontane. As usual, literature provides the site (both as a literal conversation point and as a structural device) at which fact and fiction come together most powerfully. Johnson is introduced in all his physicality, coming sweating towards the bench dressed all in black. The opportunity that Grass has clearly had to study this man and talk to him at close quarters lends his protagonist a confident authority when he says, for example, ‘[n]icht zu übersehen war, daß sich in seiner überanstrengten Gestalt ein […] fortgeschrittener Alkoholiker verbarg, von dessen äußerer, wie aufgeschwemmt wirkender Erscheinung etwas Bedrohliches ausging; dabei war alles, was er sagte, zierlich gedrechselt und manchmal von närrisch verkorkster Manier.’ (604) Fonty’s unforgivingly close observation here and at various points during the episode means that the reader can almost sense Johnson’s presence, and the conversation too is clearly formulated from first hand experience of the subject and his idiosyncrasies. It is a small step from the text to the bars where Grass and Johnson themselves met to exchange literary ideas, and Grass is nearer to his creation Fonty at this point than anywhere else in the text.⁸⁰ In this sense, the meeting is grounded in the same ‘reality principle’ that is

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⁸⁰I am, however, wary of eliding Grass and his protagonist as closely as does, for example, Jörg Magenau, who in an unfavourable review icily notes the resemblance thus: ‘[s]chaut man genau hin, dann gleicht Fonty nicht nur Fontane, sondern auch dem Autor bis auf die Schnurrbartspitze.’ Jörg Magenau,
at work in Grass’s treatment of the most important historical figure in the text, Fontane, whereby as Grass plumbs the gaps in Fontane’s biography, he is careful to retain a sense of ‘this is how it really might have been’ to lend a convincing edge to what is so often hypothesis. The image of the fictionalised Johnson is created as a distilled version of his own biography and reputation as a morally impeccable intellectual obsessed with detail. He arrives ‘an den Glockenschlag’ (603), and their conversation is dictated by the ‘in ihm steckende Detailkrammer’. (604) In it, literary and biographical themes are unequivocally linked: Johnson takes issue with Fonty’s defence of the ending of *L’Adultera* and in this way underscores the integrity of his own moral position. By contrast, Fonty’s self-professed laxity reminds us of his ambivalent role as cultural commentator.

The figure of the author Johnson, so associated with the quest to find a fictional narrative position most approximate to the truth of what it told, is invoked here as a witness, as it were, to Grass’s own position. Johnson’s eagerness to lure his companion into stating his opinion on the Brecht/Lukács debate on realism is only the most explicit reference made to his own experimentations with literary form. The representational devices of Grass’s narrative at this point are typically complex, and overtly concerned with fictionalisations of the real. The ‘imagined reality’ of the meeting on a bench near the Fontane memorial directly recalls the previous episode: this time, it is the exiled Johnson who shelters inconspicuously beside the statue, invisible to the groups of schoolchildren around him. Johnson’s present to Fonty of part of the manuscript from *Jahrestage* in which *Schach von Wuthenow* appears is tangible, like Fonty’s own letter to Martha (and Grass’s text), but it is also invented, and as such confirmation of the primacy of fiction in this textual environment. The epistolary mode in which the episode

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is recounted draws attention to the various authorial hands (re-)inscribing the episode for the reader, its rhetorical frame complementing the literary device of the imagined conversation between Johnson and Fonty, and allowing us space to reflect on the subject of that conversation. The narrative constantly indicates its own strategies, manifestly concerned to alert us to its status as representing text. The Fontane intertext, recalled to the new text by way of Johnson’s own use of Fontane, plays a central role in this process, not least because its particular thematic concern, with ‘invented reality’, corresponds precisely to the issues explicated in the episode as a whole:

Übrigens sind in dieser Episode etliche den ‘Schach’ betreffende Briefe zitiert, so die von mir geteilte Klage, ewig als ‘märkischer Wanderer’ stigmatisiert zu sein. Desgleichen findet sich das allzu vordergründige Lob meines Talents für das Gegenständliche erwähnt; dabei wurde doch alles, bis auf den letzten Strohhalm, erfunden: In der Tempelhofer Kirche bin ich nie gewesen, Schloß Wuthenow existierte nirgendwo, und in einem Brief an Mama habe ich mich über einen märkischen Geschichtsverein amüsiert, der, bald nach Erscheinen der Novelle, eine Schiffsfahrt über den See bis hin zum Schloß angekündigt hatte. Im Fall ‘Schach’ siehst Du, wie genau man lügen muß und wie brühwarm der geneigte Leser jegliche Suppe löffelt, wenn sie zuvor literarisch gewürzt und fein abgeschmeckt ist. (607)

The complaint, citing Fontane in a letter to his friend Friedrich, focuses our attention on the reliability of a presumed reality and on the reader’s susceptibility, namely that desire to take anything for unassailable truth as long as it is sufficiently convincing in its represented form.\(^2\) Grass’s narrative, meandering casually through these different texts, invents its own particular veracity, radically literary in nature. Yet the concluding lines of the letter confirm its concern with a contemporary political reality: Fonty is part of a Germany which is ‘nicht bloß mehr ein Begriff, sondern eine starke Tatsache’ (610), where racist incidents in the Tiergarten rub shoulders with the reality of politically divided families and the quickly fading novelty of the KaDeWe. And the imagined Johnson stands as further evidence of the very real consequences of a political ideology that could not accommodate him. When Hoftaller chastises his charge for his ‘ungenehmigte Kontaktaufnahme’ (609) and rues the state’s ‘mangelnde Fürsorge’ in

not managing to cultivate Johnson's talent within its own borders, Fonty's fury is tangible.

In my analysis of the events narrated in the two journeys to Neuruppin, I have explored the problematic of the confrontation between fiction and reality, thematised in both episodes with the appearance of the two authors at the foot of the memorial to a third. It is my contention that the episodes are of the utmost importance, both thematically in the way that they bring to attention the situation of the writer in his or her political environment, and formally in their use of particular narrative dynamics as a means of reflecting on the issues of representation with which they are concerned. The representation of an historical or political reality as fiction critically foregrounds the role of imagination in filling in those gaps inevitably left in the historical fabric. The documentary weight of *Ein weites Feld*, which confronts us in the endless intertextual significations, is at all times held in balance by the creative, fictional musings of Fonty and the intertextual narrative itself. The complex patternings of language that make up the reality of the text are thus at the heart of a critical engagement with 'how things are', and in this radically discursive literary environment the rule of fact does not hold sway. Rather, we are enjoined to be sceptical, for everything here is conjecture and interpretation, each conversation related second-hand, each memory blurred by the historical layers through which it is passed, each fictional event framed by narratorial whispering, eavesdropping and conspiracy. In this respect, the reader's own experience becomes part of the make-up of the text: we too are straining to hear and see the definite form of what is only ever hinted at in shadow.

I have already suggested that the political critique is implicitly instated by way of the digressive structural form, central to which is the equivocal *Fontane-Ton* itself and the proliferating literary intertext that resists all linearity. The very length of the text suggests an aesthetic resistance to the political urgency of the events of 1989-91 that it
takes as its subject. I have attempted to show how Fontane's world is brought to bear variously on the new text, not just offering a historical counterpart to the contemporary political situation, but a comprehensively indeterminate fictional format in which to represent and reflect on a rapidly approaching unity. The indeterminate voice of Fonty is, of course, precisely the means whereby Wuttke the cultural commentator finds critical leeway under the socialist regime: 'man vergnügte sich hinter vorgehaltener Hand, wenn seiner verblüffend genauen Zitierkunst ironische Anspielungen auf die sozialistische Gegenwart gelangen [...]’ (203), and his public is assured ‘indem er vieldeutig blieb, nur in Nebensätzen die Zeit schwinden und voraneilen ließ oder die “weißen Schimmel des sozialistischen Realismus” wie ein Zirkusdirektor durch die Manege trieb.’ (203) Fonty’s lectures, in constant dialogue with a literary heritage, are ‘mehr plauderdenn dozierend’ (203), and as such counter the focus of an enforced political belief system. As rhetorical performances for which Fonty is supposedly famed, they remain for the most part veiled in the conversational form of the narrative, brought to us, as above, in the form of hearsay. The strategic position of the narrative collective, overhearing Fonty and gathering his pronouncements, gossiping with his wife Emmi, ‘reading’ his Fontane letters to Martha, studiously maintaining the Fontane mode as a literary and biographical principle, effectively provides a thoroughly literary, rhetorical frame for the equally studied conversational strategies of their quarry. Moreover, their presence is a permanent ironic reminder of the constant vigilance under which the politically dubious Fonty is kept. The intertextual literary mode, and that resulting self-conscious relationship we have with the political events it frames, is the means by which a critical political perspective – historical and contemporary – is constructed, and it is those points at which the literary voice is at its most rampant and playful where a political critique comes most resonantly to the fore. With this in mind, I would like to look at the scene that represents the culmination of the intertextual project
of *Ein weites Feld*, Fonty’s final public appearance in the *Kulturbrauerei* before he goes to ground.

**Reading II: the intertextual causeur**

The event is a public reading from Fonty’s autobiography *Meine Kinderjahre*, which he has written after one of his periodic nervous breakdowns. Fontane’s *Kinderjahre* are brought into play in this text at one remove. That is, the circumstances of their composition are re-invoked as a biographical interlude in the narrative, but the text of which they consist is itself not part of the intertext. Fonty’s speech, defined intertextually, consists more of an interplay between an existing, acknowledged text (Fontane’s *Kinderjahre*) and a notional, non-existent text (Fonty’s *Kinderjahre*) that is fictionally described by and dependent on the text’s assumption of the prior work. Fonty’s autobiographical project is introduced via an account of Fontane’s critical breakdown during the composition of *Effi Briest*. The narrative stages this account as part of Fonty’s own delirium: ‘[d]och am ausgiebigsten sprach sich während der Fieberschübe die große Schreibkrise des Unsterblichen aus: das Innehalten inmitten der Arbeit an “Effi Briest”.’ (214) The advice of Fontane’s doctor, to write his memoirs as a form of therapy, is the first part of a sequence of references which culminate in Fonty’s speech in the *Kulturbrauerei*, and Hofstaller (whose role in the process is paramount) refers to and then replays the doctor’s wisdom. So the doctor’s ‘[“w]enn Sie wieder gesund werden wollen, dann schreiben Sie eben was anderes, zum Beispiel Ihre Lebenserinnerungen. Fangen Sie gleich morgen mit der Kinderzeit an!”’ (215) anticipates Hofstaller’s role in the knowingly retrospective narrative technique, which states that ‘Fonty jedoch wurde nicht durch ärztlichen Rat aus dem Bett geschleucht, auch Frau und Tochter konnten sein Fieber nicht vertreiben; als schießlich Emmi erschöpft nach Bettruhe verlangte, war es Hofstaller, dem die gesundmachende Idee
The technique of rehearsing events narratively in anticipation of their occurrence is one on which the text depends. One of the effects that this has is to undermine the collective narrative as an authorial voice: the narrators are not privy to the structural organisation of the intertextual cross-referencing, and indeed, dependent as they are on reportage, lag behind in the face of it ("Fonty sagte uns später, Hofstaller habe..." (227)). The text's structural narrative agility thus offers a diametric contrast to the sluggishness of its narrators. Where they use the Fontane intertext as a retrospective explanation of the present, the text uses it to adjoin past with present and more importantly with future in a relation that ironically transcends the different modes. So the biographical Fontane intertext presages the circumstances of the creation of the ‘new’ fictional autobiography, and Hofstaller’s advice in turn anticipates the circumstances of its public airing. Hofstaller himself has a curative role (being referred to as Fonty’s ‘heilender Arzt’ (229)) entirely absent in the original Tallhover, who is incapable of showing humanity, and whose only recourse after admitting to his guilt is suicide. This benign facet of Hofstaller is even more developed when Fonty suffers his second breakdown, when the spy is literally in loco medicis until Madeleine’s arrival. Hofstaller is an enabling force just as much as a curse, as his central role in the organisation of the event in the Kulturbrauerei suggests.

The chapter entitled ‘Diverse Brände oder: Wer hat gezündelt?’ is the one episode which could in any way be said to adopt a dramatic narrative mode. Up until this point, the text has largely eschewed narrative effects such as suspense and climax. Whilst the
patterns of Fonty's speech are no less digressive than we have come to expect from Fonty, the narrative voice betrays an anxiety, a sense of unfolding urgency, that is strikingly distinct from its usual retrospective phlegm (even the whodunit quality of the chapter heading is indicative of the impending drama). To a certain extent, the episode's position in the long, uneventful trajectory of the narrative lends it a naturally accelerating force created through the reader's expectation of denouement. Events are clearly coming to an end from the point of view of the central characters: the double configuration of Fonty/Hoftaller, already disrupted and triangulated by Madeleine's arrival, is finally disintegrating altogether with the acknowledgement that Hoftaller has no further role to play in post GDR Germany, and Fonty's wife and daughter are happily settled in their new roles as westernised consumers par excellence. Only Fonty's future remains to be resolved, and the reader would be unusual not to seek (even if vainly) in the penultimate chapter a movement towards resolution, in whatever form this might take. There are of course two possible resolutions to be sought in this accelerated narrative moment: firstly the personal one, in the form of Fonty and his individual fate (as a sceptic who has been, by definition, irresolute in the face of history and change); secondly, and I suggest, equally critical for an understanding of and response to the text, the structural resolution (of a text which resists closure but clearly seeks to motivate politically). Therefore, whilst the position of the episode, as the final 'event' in the text, naturally suggests climax, it seems to me also that the text comes full circle in the way that it makes the event (the reading of Fonty's autobiography) into a final and fundamental textual event: namely, the absolute integration, via the Fontane intertext, of literature and politics.

Fonty's appearance in the Kulturbrauerei is introduced with all the panache of a grand finale by the narrative collective, who cannot disguise in their enthusiastic description of the scene both a somewhat vulgar eagerness to impress on the reader
Fonty’s celebrity status and a certain measure of ill-disguised pride at their own proximity to him. The momentousness of the occasion is established in the opening line of the episode: ‘[n]icht nur der Prenzlauer Berg, ganz Berlin kam; und selbstverständlich zählten wir zum Publikum.’ (744) Fonty’s inhabitation of Fontane has been shown to have made him the target of members of the public on the street, in an ironically old-fashioned version of the syndrome of the celebrity actor who becomes the public property of her/his fans, and here he is provided with a public platform on which to give a more formalised performance, as of old, of that for which he is famed. Whilst his notoriety has always been gained by literary means (for example, his use of Fontane quotations as a form of resistance during the war), it is sustained through its indisputably political force, as the constitution of the audience indeed suggests. Among the myriad cultural events put on at the Kulturbrauerei, Fonty’s speech has special significance.

weil der Vortragende [...] für die Älteren im Publikum die graue Zeit als Fonty überlebt hatte; und selbst die Jüngeren wußten, und sei es vom Hörensagen: Mit dem war doch mal was, ist lange her, irgendwann früher, als hier noch alles auf Zack lief. Soll was gesagt haben, was er nicht durfte, doppelsinnige Anspielungen, die den Bonzen nicht paßten. Bekam deshalb Ärger. Jedenfalls muß man, wenn dieser Fonty redet, dabeisein. (745)

In the eyes of the youth among the audience, for whom the GDR is fast becoming an historical rather than contemporary state of affairs, Fonty is also associated principally with past events, but not consigned to history, as their presence suggests. His ongoing relevance as a cultural and political spokesman is made clear not simply in the fact that the event is sold out, but also in the fact that the audience consists specifically of East Berliners, despite the narrators’ initial impression that ‘ganz Berlin kam’. (744) Even the three authors who are rumoured to be present are resident in, and firmly anchored in the literary tradition of, the GDR: Christa Wolf, Stephan Hermlin and Heiner Müller. Thus the seeming heterogeneity of the crowd is, on closer inspection, shown to be of a distinctly politicised making, and more specifically to be dramatically indicative of a
gaping political divide across the ‘unified’ city. Of the former East, the only institution not represented is Fonty’s own employer, the Treuhand, which, in its absence, becomes the focus of the episode. In addition, the narrators comment that the venue is already in the hands of the Treuhand, a detail that is just one of many small and ironic narrative asides whose presence belies the apparent political insensitivity of these self-proclaimed ‘Fußnotensklaven’. (12) Hence, before the speech even begins, it has been firmly established as a highly charged political event in the face of which the description of Fonty as ‘Beweis lebendiger, überlebender, unsterblicher Literatur’ (746) seems inadequate. When Fonty takes the platform, something is expected of him by the audience that justifies the fact that he is finally, briefly introduced as ‘ein Begriff’. (746) The text, in so doing, also sets itself a creatively daunting task, in that Fonty’s speech must live up to, or in some way challenge, the reader’s own expectations, which have inevitably been engaged by the preposterous narrative anticipation. Certainly Fonty, as we have discussed above, is not so much a character as a ‘term’ in the text, and his speech has to confirm him as such, enriching the reader’s appreciation of the term’s wider application to the intertextual mode of Ein weites Feld.

His introductory salvo perfectly encapsulates the method of the text, and confirms his particular role in it as a figure who not only is suspicious of grand narratives and political directives, but who, in his own style, represents an entirely alternative communicative aesthetic. These first words can be regarded as an apology not only for himself and his particular technique, but also for the sprawling indirectness of the text:

Mit dem ersten Wort “Übrigens” und der folgenden Floskel “Bin eigentlich kein Redner” hatte er einige Lacher auf seiner Seite, doch als Fonty sich grundsätzlich erklärte: “Reden müssen hat für mich immer etwas hervorragend Schreckliches gehabt, deshalb meine Aversion gegen den Parlamentarismus”, ebbte die Heiterkeit ab. Dann schlug er eine Volte “Bin aber von Geburt her ein Causeur, was heißen soll, ein Plauderer” und befand sich sogleich im Manuskript, beim Beginn der “Kinderjahre”. (747)

Fonty’s arrival at the lectern, which has been set up by the narrators as the dramatic focus of a long period of suspense and anticipation, instantly returns the narrative to its
more typical mode of indirection. With his throwaway, anti-climactic beginning, Fonty shows his discomfort not just with the situation per se (the illumination of the lectern places him in a literal and metaphorical spotlight which his ‘übrigens’ seeks to deflect), but also with the conventions of public speaking as something focused and incisive. No wonder that parliamentarianism, with its emphasis on reasoned debate, is antithetical to a self-proclaimed ‘causeur’ like Fonty, with his inimitable literary expansiveness. As ever, the indirection is formally enacted, the speech never disengaged from the literary narrative framework, and only rarely allowed to attain status as a piece of spoken rhetoric independent (even if only fictionally through the convention of direct speech) from the narrators and the actual written text. The manuscript out of which he reads is reconstructed using reporting verbs like ‘er warf einen Blick auf Neuruppin’ (747), ‘verglich das bürgerliche Elternhaus…’ (747), ‘blendete er […] ein’ (748), ‘vermischte Apothekengerichte’. (748) Thus the reader is placed in a distinct position from the audience, for whilst the audience experiences the reading as reality (Fonty’s/Fontane’s childhood) rendered as literature, the version provided for the reader is founded in fiction, and only becomes differentiated from the actual text of Ein weites Feld in its recollection of the existent Fontane autobiography, that is as intertext. Fonty’s weaving together of the two childhoods is sketched out as an abstract, and the narrators depend on the intertext and the reader to supply volume to the text. When the reader learns that ‘seine Verdoppelung ging so glatt auf, daß ihr das Publikum mühelos folgen konnte’ (748), s/he is more than ever aware of the incommensurable gap between the intricate and accomplished detail in the talk and the elliptical impression that s/he actually gleans of it in the narrative. The narrative, by largely occluding Fonty’s words and undoing his direct speech, on the one hand lessens for the reader the presumed impact that it has on the audience, and on the other hand, precisely by this means gives narrative expression to its free-flowing suggestiveness and indirection. Also, and in direct relation to this, the
technique effectively reconfigures the reader as a more highly privileged participant in the scene, required to exercise imagination in a way that the audience is not.

The intertextual dynamic of Fonty’s rhetoric in this episode represents an extremely formalised paradigm of the narrative principle of *Ein weites Feld*. The process of the text, as I hope I have shown by now, is one of seemingly unrestrained digression: the impossibly broad intertext signifies a radically unscripted freedom from the new text. Yet this apparent departure from the script is precisely what gives the text its – double – focus, its aesthetic and critical orientation. And thus the intertextual voice, along with the associative and imaginative scope it offers, can (and must) be seen to function in a highly structured, tightly controlled textual environment. During Fonty’s speech, similarly, the same rules are in place, clearly demonstrating the distinction between intertextual digression and loss of orientation. As he talks, Fonty’s own script quickly becomes redundant, the properties of the intertext appearing to overwhelm the rigid format of the written text. In his decision ‘plötzlich vom Manuskript zu lassen und freiweg zu reden’ (749) he finds the mode of address suited to his ‘Plauderei’: the manuscript, despite its apparent fluidity, will always be restrictive for a natural ‘causeur’ like Fonty. The word ‘freiweg’ has already been used in connection with the speech, by Hof taller, when he initially broaches the subject with Fonty: ‘[a]ls, wie heißt Ihre Devise: Freiweg! Am Besten ist, morgen gleich anfangen.’ (227) And it is used again by Hof taller, after the event:

[I]ch habe gerochen, was kommt, als er das Manuskript wegschob und nur noch freiweg…Das war schon immer so, wenn er…Kaum hat er sich mit nem Trick – ‘Übrigens, was ich noch sagen wollte…’ – vom Text weggeredet, kommt er zur Sache. (760)

As Hof taller well knows, Fonty’s motto ‘freiweg’ is used as a discursive principle not in the sense of ‘direct, to the point’, but rather ‘openly, without restraint’, a prerequisite for which is leaving the text, as he does early on in the speech. But although it relies on an open structure which the manuscript is shown symbolically to resist, his free-flowing
rhetorical method if anything requires a more rigorously disciplined structural network for its effects to be realised. When his restless audience begins to demand that he come to the point, it is at a moment when he has momentarily unbalanced the delicate relationship that the Fontane intertext shares with his own text, and which is required to illuminate his subject, losing himself in the *Wanderungen* 'zwischen obskuren Adelsquerelen und mittlerweile bauschellen Herrensitzen'. (750) Nevertheless, despite the narrators’ fears ‘daß sich Fonty verlieren könnten’ (750), he finds his way back to the critical intertextual tension, and with it to the audience, in the final, virtuosic literary game. Critically, it is mention of the *Treuhand* (the absence of representatives from which has already implicitly lent the evening a political resonance) and its appropriation of all those buildings and places recorded by Fontane in his *Wanderungen*, that brings the speaker to what Madeleine anxiously calls the ‘Hauptsache’ (750), and what the narrators similarly refer to as ‘das Eigentliche’, namely, ‘das Spätwerk des Unsterblichen, die Romane und Novellen’. (750) The recollection of Fontane’s most creative and prolific literary period has a profound effect on the pace of the speech, and on the audience’s understanding of it.

It is the *Treuhand* that first gives the cue to Fonty to begin distilling the strictly (auto)biographical, of which the reading nominally consists, into a more ‘purely’ literary form, and which then goes on to play host to Fontane’s works. Fonty spins for his audience a ‘literarisches Fest’ (751), a fancy dress party consisting of literary characters from Fontane’s works. The venue is, of course, the *Treuhand* itself, the occasion the celebration of the thousandth successful transaction, and the theme, appropriately, ‘Frau Jenny Treibel läßt bitten’. Fontane’s portrait of early capitalism in *Frau Jenny Treibel*, and its personification in the humorous figure of Frau Jenny herself, provides Fonty with the first of many suitably caustic thematic intertexts. Whilst

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83 'Abwicklung', the German word used, is as uncomfortably euphemistic as its English translation. Fonty has been given the task of finding a more appropriate word, but fails to do so.
the event is entirely of Fonty’s making, an inspired flight of fancy, the absence of anyone from the institution at this reading ironically allows Fonty’s imagination full reign, so giving him the space to locate the ‘parallel’ event in the realm of the plausible for his own audience. The interplay between the plausible and the real is a trump card that becomes relevant at the very end of the speech. Here, in direct speech for the first time, Fonty sweeps his audience along into his vision: ‘[w]üßten Sie das schon? Ist Ihnen bekannt, meine Damen und Herren, daß heute, zu eben dieser Stunde, im ehemaligen Haus der Ministerien, vormals Reichsluftfahrtministerium, die uns so gegenwärtige Treuhandanstalt illustre Gäste geladen hat?’ (751) With the backdrop of the Treuhand, the literary theme can scarcely be abstracted from its real-life political setting. Thus, whilst Fonty himself concentrates on the spectacle that the party and its Fontane characters presents, his use of the literary festival is from the start of an entirely political nature, relying on his audience to reapply the literary intertext and in so doing configure for themselves the political inferences that are made.

The range of Fontane’s works from which the characters are drawn to make up the numbers of the party is striking. Obvious figures like Effi and Lene are surrounded by obscure housemaids, doctors, and policemen from smaller works, and the audience, emboldened by Fonty’s vision of the variety and sheer numbers crowding into the Treuhand out of Fontane’s fiction, starts to bring their own imagination into play. This is a well-versed collection of listeners, on whose erudition the speech relies, and yet the narrators, in typical archive fashion, are ahead of the game, fretting over the absence of, but too embarrassed to ask, for example, after ‘dem homöopathischen Veterinärarzt namens Lissauer aus “Unwiederbringlich”’. (754) The fact that the whole of the later Fontane corpus is retrieved and compressed into such a small space means that each character is flattened, even caricatured, in his or her presentation. Thus Effi and Lene are introduced to us in conversation with one another ‘als gäbe es keinen
Standesunterschied’ (752), and both audience and reader must re-supply the social context of each heroine’s tragedy to this text. The characters come as debutantes to the new situation, their dimensions regained by our memory of them. It is not surprising that the audience is moved to participate at the mention of the hostess of the party, Frau Jenny Treibel, who is credited with the idea for the event. As a character supremely representative of the nouvelle riche, whose cultural pretensions typically provide a veneer for obsessive money-making and social climbing, she forms a simple bridge between literature and politics: ‘[n]ur sie versteht es, Geschäft und Poesie miteinander zu verknüpfen.’ (753) The lucrative business of culture is called emphatically and uncomfortably to attention: the guests, ‘potente Investoren und Großkaufleute’ (752), are on business as usual, only this time in character: ‘Mathilde Möhring’ hints at a possible 1001st idea for a takeover; Bismarck, putting in an appearance, is accompanied by his advisor, Gersan von Bleichröder, now reincarnated as a modern millionaire with a stake in the Dresdner Bank. The intertext thus reintroduces the social dimensions of Fontane’s figures into the spectacle via, on the one hand, their interaction with one another, and, on the other, their ironically transparent relation to the guests ‘hidden’ behind their various disguises. Within the imagined environment of the Treuhand, the guests are metaphorical representations of a cultural colonialism of unimaginable proportions. The political inferences the reader has to make are, as usual, wholly dependent on referential knowledge of Fontane’s representation of the successful bourgeoisie of late nineteenth century German society. Crucially, it is our literary memory that provides the focus for Fonty’s political astuteness.

Frau Jenny Treibel, as the hostess, inevitably brings to mind the real-life figure of Birgit Breuel, president of the Treuhand from 1991 until its closure in 1994. Breuel wrote a spirited defence of the institution’s policies, objecting to Grass’s ‘subjektive Wertung’ of its work. Birgit Breuel, ‘Auferstanden aus Romanen’, Wirtschaftswoche, 7 September 1995, reprinted in Negt, ed., pp. 158-60. Whilst she refrains from commenting directly on her own treatment in the Grass text, she expresses her anger over comments that Grass made in interview justifying his literary exploitation of the murder of the previous president, Detlev Karsten Rohwedder.
However, as I have been concerned to show throughout my discussion so far, the literary intertext is altogether too resonant to be contained at this one level of fairly singular analogy, whereby literature in some way comes to stand for politics. The party in the *Treuhand* cannot satisfactorily be abbreviated into a singular political point (namely, the view that the East has been subject to a wholesale takeover by the West), not least because the digressive literary intertext itself formally resists a comparative reading. The use of Fontane’s characters in such an unarguably political context raises more interesting questions about the power of literature in political representation than many critics, accusing Grass of doing nothing more than grinding his own political axe, have allowed.\footnote{Most notably Marcel Reich-Ranicki, ‘Und es muß gesagt werden...Ein Brief von Marcel Reich-Ranicki an Günter Grass zu dessen Roman *Ein weites Feld*, Der Spiegel, 21 August 1995, pp. 162-9.} Rather than setting up neat parallel lines, the intertext traverses a line between literature and politics, enjoining the reader (along with the audience) to be aware of links which indubitably articulate political concerns traced in the text as a whole. But along with this, and I would argue, more urgently still, the intertext asks the reader to address the interplay between the fictional literary past and the real political present that Fonty exploits during his speech. This is a textual concern, and one which precludes the audience at the *Kulturbrauerei*, being firstly naively unaware of the fact/fiction dichotomy, and secondly itself part of the text’s fiction. In the increasingly hectic dialogue between fact and fiction that Fonty pursues in the concluding part of the speech, Madeleine’s anxious prediction that her grandfather will ‘bis zum Äußersten gehen’ (754) is fulfilled.

Once Fonty has drawn the audience into his rhetoric, to the point where (in what could be thought of as a rather tongue-in-cheek reference to poststructuralist debates) ‘alle redeten Text’ (753), the fictional world is given full reign. Neither Madeleine’s desire ‘dem Spuk ein Ende zu machen’ (754), nor the narrators’ vaguely uneasy sense – impotent, as ever, in their retrospective observation – that they ‘hätten [...] eingreifen
sollen' (754), can hold the narrative back. Fonty is supremely in control of his audience, and whilst this is shown initially in their eagerness to take part in Fonty’s imaginative vision, the cumulative effect of this vision gradually erodes their ability to distinguish between the imaginary and the real. Whilst at first they were not only aware of the speech’s fictional status, but also bored by it, now they are in thrall to its seductive power and hence unable to retain the fictional framework around it with which they began. Thus when Fonty eventually leaves the party in the Treuhand ‘auf sich beruhen’ (756) and returns to the manuscript, the experience for his audience is completely different from at the beginning of his speech, when they resisted the rhetoric. The ‘diverse Brânde’ of Fontane’s novels, which Fonty draws into his Kinderjahre, prove too realistic not only for the audience, but for the narrators and Madeleine, who believe that they are ‘Augenzeugen’ of each instance: thus when the speech is interrupted by the news of an actual fire in the Treuhand, everyone crowds outside, under the misapprehension that this is the final masterstroke of Fonty’s speech, and delighted that ‘der lichterlohe Ausklang des Festes von der Wirklichkeit beglaubigt worden war.’ (758) Fonty has thus, by the time the ‘real’ fire brings the rhetoric prematurely to a close, so successfully merged the metaphorical and the literal in his audience’s consciousness that he has pre-empted his own planned conclusion to the speech.

In every sense, the power of the imagination has triumphed: Fonty has his audience in his hand, and takes them to the limit, as promised. I would venture that for the reader too, this is a particularly seductive episode, anchoring us in the literary fray in a formalised role as recipients of an oration and requiring us to succumb to its virtuosic literary imaginings. The dimensions of the rhetorical vision are grounded equally in the literal and the fictional, so that those real places and buildings that make up Fontane’s world and the contemporary environment are at the same time constitutive of the architecture of the text, that is, its literary representations. The narrative itself, far from
making fun of the audience for not being able to separate what is real from what is not, rather confirms this very confusion by making it a textual, theoretical issue, using the intertext as a way of bringing the two into debate. In fact the audience has a simple response, because they initially mistake one for the other (the fictional for the literal), before then confidently re-establishing the distinction in their explanation of what has happened as "symbolhafte Paralleleignis", a newspaper headline reading "Vortragskünstler versucht sich als Hellseher." (763) The reader’s response to the actual narrative must be more complex, because it must in addition make sense of Fonty’s own, somewhat disgruntled remark that "[i]st doch Fiktion alles, und nur in einem höheren Sinn wirklich." (758) Even a rational understanding of fiction as a mode of speech distinct from what we believe to be ‘real’ is not enough to undermine its power to convince in an altogether less reflexive sense.

It seems to me that this episode is paradigmatic in its use of intertext as a self-reflexive mode. The Fontane intertext, resolutely literary as it is, brings a political dimension into play in the new text. Those particular social structures in place in Fontane’s time and reflected above all in his literary works function as a resonant historical background to the present political situation. Fontane is witness to the collision of two worlds, where the old structures of authority, self-censorship and the comfortable fixity of class difference are challenged by a gathering sense of the forces for change. In Fontane’s magnificent representation of this world, there is both assent and critique, both acknowledgement of the inevitability of change and nostalgia for those familiar structures that are gently being dismantled. In the Wendezeit of the new text, the urgent political momentum captured in key moments of the text, such as the first New Year after the fall of the wall, monetary union, the official reunification, is represented by way of a literary intertext whose determinedly un-hyped mode of reflection and reportage offers a narrative vantage point: as the events hurry along, their
fictional representation is resolutely unhurried, even frustrating in its refusal to reach a point or a conclusion. As a 'climax' to the literary expanse of the text, Fonty's speech is precisely inconclusive in form and effect. The intertext confounds any notion of a thematic resolution: its aesthetic is radically open-ended, unfinished, and unresolved in nature. The political parallels it sets up are only, to my mind, one aspect of a rather more profound confrontation with issues of historical representation, and with the particular issue of the author's role in inventing a literary perspective that can reflect critically on what it portrays. Within the doubling intertextual mode, Grass neither distorts the past nor the present, because the narrative voice is epically fictional, not documentary, in form. With this self-professing fictional voice, the narrative finds space to debate not only with the characters and their versions of events, but also with its own representation of these things and our readerly attempts to take these things 'as read'. Where everything is reclaimed as fiction, where everything is subjected to interpretation and retrospective representation, as here, and where, finally 'alle redeten Text' (753), the reader is also required to become sceptical of anything that claims the status of unassailable reality. This, to me, is where the intertextual form can be thought to generate its real critical force in *Ein weites Feld*, and where I suggest that we also find a sense of that authorial integrity that Grass seeks to produce in his representation of contemporary events.
2. The weight of history

The complex intertextual pattern of *Ein weites Feld* delivers the reader into a literary world that is at the same time utterly grounded in a literal environment. This environment is Berlin 1989-91, history in the making, a period of momentous upheaval in the German consciousness. The tangible sense of a city at a point of change is vividly brought to us: the hustle and bustle of post-*Wende Ku’damm*, the contemplative calm of the *Tiergarten*, the wall itself, quickly succumbing to the *Spechte* in their search for what is already literally a piece of history. So far, I have principally been concerned to explore the processes of a referential narrative mode, firstly in order to show how it conveys the sense of this concrete city and the contemporary events it is witness to within a rigorously fictional dimension, and secondly to suggest how these textual strategies of duplicity both represent and enable reflection on thematic concerns. It is my belief that the intertext, intruding upon and problematising the divide between the fictional world of the text and the real world beyond (the world that the reader also inhabits), constitutes the principal structural aid to the reader’s occupation of a critical perspective in relation to the contemporary events narrated. The imaginative dimension lent by the broadly signifying intertext is of fundamental importance to the way in which Grass builds up a sense of time and space, and to the way that this expanse, the *weites Feld* of his text, is used to narrate the brief timespan of the *Wendezeit* itself. It is, as we see immediately, a hugely historical field, and it is my intention now to look more precisely to the historical weight of the text, the figurative and literal past brought into play by the intertextual devices I have already discussed, and analyse the part this plays in establishing a critical perspective on the present.

This sense of the past is rendered in the form of the antecedent texts brought to bear on the new text and in the reference to events and characters from German history, the constant and critical point of departure both for the main character and the narrative
voice. The text is marked by a weighty historical awareness that provides a concrete counterpoint to the extemporising narrative of the present. History is not a backdrop to the text, but is embraced as a central component in its making, so that the narrative relies on the past as a mode, not just of illuminating or contextualising, but actually of relating the present. Just as Fonty cannot, literally, be conceived or conceived of without his alter ego Fontane, so the narrative itself is only breathed into existence by way of its commitment to a historical perspective, in which processes of memory and recollection are of critical importance. In this sense nothing contemporary is new, but is apprehended retrospectively: persons, events and the city itself as a collection of spaces and buildings have all, technically, been seen before. The present is a latecomer to its own age, and the reader can only gain access to it via the historicising voice of the intertext. However, the past does not, ipso facto, constitute an explanation of the present in the text. The use of history enables the text to engage so polemically with the present (as it indisputably does) precisely by not following a teleological pattern, but by invoking it in a — paradoxically — ahistorical form. Grass’s history is rendered as a historical intertext that is bound consequentially to the present without however acting as its cause. Yet the past is also the source of anxiety for the present, and contemporary Berlin is contextualised here above all within those dark elements of German history. If the present is so mired in the past, as the textual conflation of the two manifestly suggests, how does this weighty and oppressive historical awareness correspond to the suspension of linear temporality presumed by the dominant intertextual aesthetic? Is this

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poststructuralist account of history, rendered literary and theoretical within the fictional modes of the text, problematic in its textual levelling of the historical field?

The metaphorical inscription of the eternal return

The retrospective analysis that the intertext permits produces an uncomfortable confrontation with the past, on both an individual and a collective level. Yet the narrative does not exert any sense of ongoing, progressive significance to the past. Rather, it sets up a cyclical version of German history consistent with a Nietzschean eternal recurrence, which seems to cast doubt on the existence of human motivation to progress (and draw consequences) from one historical period to the next. The model is, of course, structurally perfectly suited to a text that finds its thematic force precisely in this pattern of recurrence occurring in the intertext. However, from an historical point of view, its implications are serious, because it threatens the assumption of a positive will to change through historical awareness. How can guilt and responsibility, preoccupations of the text throughout, retain any meaning in the absence of a presumption of history's role in bringing ourselves to account over the past? Grass himself, challenged in an interview with Stern to explain the apparent view of history expounded in the text as 'nur die wechselnd kostümierte Wiederkehr des Gleichen', first distances himself from the text with the comment that it is 'Fontanes Geschichtsbild', then elucidates his own perspective:

Ich bin Geschichts-Skeptiker und schon in anderen Büchern polemisch gegen Hegels Weltgeist angetreten. Dessen Hineininterpretieren von Sinn in die Geschichte liegt mir genausowenig wie die Vorstellung von der ewigen Wiederkehr, mit der man die völlige Hoffnungslosigkeit des Geschichtsprozesses versinnbildlicht. Ich glaube, daß die Geschichte ein absurder Prozeß ist, aus dem zu lernen schwerfällt.87

Grass thus drives a clear wedge between his own view of history and the 'weitgehend fatalistisches' that he has earlier on in the interview attributed to Fontane. He also, in

referring to comments that the central character Fonty makes in the text, aligns him with Fontane, hence implicating Fontane directly in the formation of the historical patterns at work in the text. Fonty, Grass implies, is, in being Fontane’s namesake, also his voice beyond the grave, and so can comfortably assume a position that Grass himself rejects. Whilst it seems reasonable for Grass to defend his right neither to share nor to take responsibility for his protagonists’ views, we can rightly interrogate the text itself to establish whether, and if so how far, it sets up any sort of alternative to Fontane’s — and Fonty’s — fatalistic analysis of history. In another interview, asked if his vision of history is fatalistic, he replies that ‘mein Geschichtsverständnis ist nicht resignativ, es ist skeptisch.’ So how does the text itself counter the deep sense of resignation that is articulated through the dominant Fontane intertext? How does Grass negotiate a path through this intertext, one which permits a sceptical, rather than a fatalistic, voice to be heard by the reader? At what point does the narrative depart from the bleak assessment of its protagonist that “‘[e]lignes [hat sich] verändert, doch nichts im Prinzip’”? (599) These are questions that require careful consideration before we can come to an understanding of the role of the historical intertext in Grass’s critical assessment of the present state of Germany. I intend, therefore, to give an account first of how Grass actually installs what he describes as Fontane’s Geschichtsbild into the text in the form of a Nietzschean ‘ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen’, and from there assess the extent to which the text permits the reader to break out of the circle and hence escape its fatalistic, and paralysing, implications.

Early on in the text, the most expressive symbol of this eternal circle is introduced:

Sogleich rückt ein Transportmittel ins Blickfeld, das seit Anbeginn in Betrieb war. Wir stellen uns den Aktenboten Theo Wuttke in einem nach vorne offenen Aufzug vor, der in zwei Fahrtrichtungen aus einer Vielzahl von Kabinen gereiht ist und unablässig, das heißt über die Wendepunkte im Keller- und Dachgeschoß hinweg, auf und ab fährt, ohne Halt, leicht klappernd, nicht ohne verhaltene Gestöhne und Seufzer, aber doch zuverlässig, sagen wir ruhig “gebetsmühlenhaft”; weshalb man diesen altmodischen, inzwischen –

trotz aller wohlmeinenden Proteste – fast überall ausgemusterten Personenaufzug "Paternoster" genannt hat. (75-6)

The paternoster is the structural centrepiece of the building in whose various employ Fonty has been throughout his working life (at this point early on in the text still the Haus der Ministerien). It is an anarchic reminder of the past and at the same time a familiar and integral presence in the day-to-day business of the staff working in the building. Its literal function serves as an expression also for the metaphorical architecture of the narrative form, and its role in staging significant events depends on both these qualities. Its obvious advantage for the characters is the uninterrupted space that it affords, both in the sense of time (because it is in constant motion, enabling conversations to be conducted at their own, leisurely pace), and of privacy (because the cabins provide a safe environment for the exchange of delicate subject matter). And as a symbolic property of the text, its passage around the historical Wendepunkte to which it has borne witness sets up a determined challenge to their presumed linearity and, indeed, to their singularity. The significance of the apparatus is brought to the reader through the figure of Fonty: introducing it, the narrative twice directly appeals to us to picture him in it, so that '[w]ir stellen uns [Fonty] in einem […] Aufzug vor’ (75), and 'so stellen wir uns Fontys Abgänge vor’ (76), and there is a lengthy physical description of his journeys up, down and around the building in the antiquated lift, and the comical figure that he cuts as he appears and disappears again, bit by bit, on each level. (76)

From the start, Fonty and the paternoster are bound together, displaying a natural physical familiarity established over his fifty years’ association with the building itself, and by the same token sharing a metaphorical affinity, a quality of timelessness supplied by the narrative which locates them together outside the linear process of history. So not only does he display a surefootedness in entering and leaving the cabins which Hoftaller entirely lacks, so that his 'sprungsicheres Vertrautsein […] gab Hoftaller ausreichend Sicherheit’ (78), but his very existence reflects those qualities for which the lift is noted.
Thus, just as the lift’s revolving journey is undertaken ‘nicht ohne verhaltenes Gestöhne und Seufzen’, and inevitably recalls in its passage something ‘altmodisch’ and ‘ausgemustert’ (76), so too Fonty’s subversive activities have sentenced him to an ‘anhaltende Gefangenschaft’ causing him sometimes ‘rückwärts wie gegenwärtig zu stöhnen’, whilst bearing it in the same restrained manner ‘über alle Wendezwischen hinweg’. (79) The lift has been ‘seit Anbeginn in Betrieb’ (75), just as Fonty has been ‘von Anbeginn unter Aufsicht’ (78), and, still more, the ‘unablässig’ (76,78) movement of the lift recalls the enactment of ‘Unsterblichkeit’ in Fonty’s intertextual performance, a term that is also eagerly embraced by the narrators. The paternoster’s grinding and grumbling course around the building thus accords the text a visceral image of the central notion of endlessly recycled time, whilst also providing the narrative with a dramatic space within and through which to enact the memory of the past and its considerable impact on the present.

In particular, the paternoster is conducive to discussion and private interchange, both political and personal in nature. In an environment where the Stasi is just the professional face of a whole cultural regime structured around spies and informants, secrecy is at a premium, and the enclosed space of the cabin is unusually intimate. As usual, though, it offers no bar to the prying narrators themselves, who are seemingly omniscient in the sense that they have access to, if not understanding of, the most remote aspects of Fonty’s life and thoughts. Fonty first sets eyes upon the then head of the Treuhand as he passes in one of the cabins of the paternoster, and when they actually chance to share the same cabin, much later in the narrative, their surroundings initiate a conversation that is not only ‘unvermittelt,’ but leaves them ‘näher, als Vater und Sohn einander vertraut sein können.’ (612) The contents of the conversation are only intimated by the narrative, not recorded, but it is enough to know that the environment of the paternoster promotes ‘jenen zeitvergessenden Plauderton’ (612)
beloved of Fonty, and that the conversation is only interrupted from the outside, with the forceful intervention of impatient security guards. The paternoster seems to engender, along with its unusual intimacy, another mode of being altogether, whose quality is not so much transitory as timeless. Not surprisingly, it is equally well-suited to ‘zwanglose’ (79) conversations, such as the one which results in Fonty’s falling in love with his wife-to-be, Emilie, at that time a young secretary in the then Reichluftfahrministerium. Missing her floor, she is persuaded by the young war reporter to travel up, around and down again, and again, and again; in this way, he extracts from her not only a promise to type up his reports, but, after the fifth lap, the first kiss. As such, the paternoster offers the same luxury of privacy as the boat on the lake, long Fonty’s preferred means of conducting his delicate political and emotional affairs in safety. The permanent movement and enclosed environment of the lift perform much the same function as the rocking rowing boat in the lake, thwarting the efforts of potential eavesdroppers. This intimacy is of course a double-edged sword, depending on the company. For Hoftaller, a ride in the paternoster or a row in the boat provides the perfect opportunity to exercise his brief, a quick look through Fonty’s files to see which might be ‘disappeared’, or a chance to confront Fonty with revelations about his past, a spot of blackmail in his usual style.

The boat, like the paternoster, is a leitmotif which cuts across time: Fonty’s initial meeting with his illegitimate French granddaughter, on the lake in the Tiergarten, revisits the circumstances in which he, in all probability, wooed her grandmother all those years ago as part of his contribution towards resistance. The motif is not just embedded in the narrative: Fonty himself explicitly voices the effects that it has on his thinking. When he sees the head of the Treuhand for the first time, passing by in the lift, his historical imagination is engaged sufficiently to conjure up a whole succession of politically significant figures, from his Reichluftsmitzwiller from fifty years before, to
Walter Ulbricht, Goebbels, and Erich Honnecker, to name but a few. It is the process of memory that reconfigures these personages together, and in the process of imagining that they come to life again, ‘nur in Fontys Rückblick [...] leibhaftig.’ (567) The filmic effect that Fonty’s memory constructs also lifts them out of the linearity that a historical consciousness imposes, because though he begins ‘mit neuer Filmrolle den historischen Übergang zu drehen’ (567), the image moves ‘[v]erlangsamt [...], Zeitlupe, Schnitt’ (567), and he ‘ließ den Episodenfilm noch einmal und abermals ablaufen.’ (568) The incongruous placing together of characters from different political regimes in the same lift, such as Ulbricht and Goebbels, reduces them unceremoniously to the status of caricatures, ‘der Kommunist neben dem Nazi, der Spitzbart neben dem Klumpfuß’ (567), in much the same way as the literary Fontane characters are later pared down to one particular phrase or characteristic in Fonty’s imagination (discussed on p. 129-30). And just as later the literary characters are collected and left ‘auf sich beruhen’ (756), so too here the names and the historical events associated with them are not part of any linear narrative scheme, but rather reverberate in the text as figments of a radically disordered imagination. At moments like this, the imposing presence of a historical consciousness is tempered by an unashamedly playful light touch, as in the ironic reference to Helmut Kohl amidst this historical parade: ‘[w]eitere Auftritte gab die Geschichte vorerst nicht her, wenngleich er allzu gerne die aus Bonn angereiste regierende Masse in eine Kabine gezwängt und in absinkender Tendenz nachgewiesen hätte.’ (568)

In these symbolically loaded spaces, the dimension of past time is rendered through the imagination: in this way, the act of recollection and the fictionalising processes of memory are foregrounded. The narrators, too, play a vital role in maintaining this recollective aesthetic, insofar as they are constant intruders, their ‘vielleichts’ and their ‘wohl deshalb’, their doubts and questionings, emphatically regurgitating the events
even as they happen. Since the contemporary events are already textually ‘old’, the past is not technically differentiated from the present. Fonty’s own writing techniques, which he elaborates quite early on in the text, provide an interesting corollary to the intermingling of past and present occurring generally in the text. His enthusiastic embrace of an imagined historical event is what lends colour and authenticity to the representation of his own wartime experience:

Herrgott! Wie mir alles lebendig wurde. [...] Das alles [...] ist heute noch ahnbar, wenngleich die Zeit, so die gegenwärtige Kriegszeit, darüber hinweggegangen ist. Habe aber dennoch in meinem Bericht das Vergangene beleben und der Gegenwart als mächtigen Kraftstrom zuleiten können. (81-2)

We are reminded here of Herman Meyer’s theoretical account of the role of the citation (cited in my introduction, p. 18) and the tension between old and new that it introduces. The historical intertext that provides the young Fonty with the inspiration he seeks in effecting a suitably vivid written account of the war is part of the same dialectical impulse that motivates his elaborately rendered performance of the historical Fontane figure. The past as a ‘mächtige[r] Kraftstrom’: this is clearly its function too in Grass’ own text, as a self-consciously imagined space in which to work. The metaphor of the paternoster, in its perfect visual accordance with an image of looping, recurrent time, is the centrepiece of this imaginative dimension, and the intertextual recapitulation of history as a whole provides a broad surface on which to inscribe the present. I would suggest that whilst the notion of eternal return is invoked, the intertextual aesthetic itself supplies an alternative critical force, because it complexly recontextualises these historical events and above all allows us to register the role of memory, recollection and imagination in creating a textual historical dimension. So the sense of historical inevitability installed by the paternoster (which also implies a preference for the old over the new, or disrupts that very opposition) is always in conflict with a deep, one might say obsessive, concern with the past and its consequences.
The shadow of the past

The conflict I have described above is perfectly captured in Fonty’s problematic relationship with his past. As the principal intertextual instance, he is the repository of the text’s historical consciousness and thus the central focus of a process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The narrative never skirts around the issue of German responsibility for its past, nor does it avoid the ramifications of Fonty’s own part in the making of a collective history. Guilt is a tangible concern of the text, perhaps the primary emotion that it inscribes, either overtly or implicitly. Present day political concerns, central to which is of course the vexed question of German reunification, are inseparable in the text from its historically founded political sensitivity. Fonty, pondering his own place in the metaphor of the paternoster, ‘in wechselnden Zeiten immer wieder auf eine steigende Kabine warten’, is overcome by the momentousness of ‘[s]oviel Größe. Soviel Abstieg. Soviel Ende und Anfang.’ (568) But his personal grasp of the weight of history circulating around the paternoster is not least due to his own extended employment and active role in the very building in which the apparatus is housed, the *Treuhand*. The fact that *Treuhand* was the working title used by Grass confirms its centrality to the text. At one level the institution is a concise embodiment of the worst kind of political annexation, the wholesale takeover of East Germany by its Western counterpart by means of selling off public property from the East to private bidders from the West. But the building itself, in much the same way as Hofstaller, is a leopard changing its spots to suit successive political environments. At the start of the text, autumn 1989, it is still home to a communist regime, as the *Haus der Ministerien*. This institution is the successor to another, the original use for which the building was built in 1935, under Nazi rule, the *Reichsluftfahrtsministerium*. And immediately after official reunification it is renovated for the occupation of the already existing *Treuhand*, moving its seat from old quarters on the *Alexanderplatz*. Nazism has given way to
communism, which in turn has been subsumed under capitalism, three ideologies, rubbing shoulders under one roof. The building’s dramatically changing historical role through the twentieth century works in conjunction with the absolutely unchanging architectural surrounds to give it a doubly ironic quality. Firstly, it displays a structural solidity that implicitly comments on the nature of the political fluctuations through which it has served as an architectural focal point: monumentally suited to the ideological certainties to which each era pretends, it nonetheless sees each through to an end. Secondly, further to this and more problematic still, its very permanence as an ultimately undifferentiated seat of political ideology is a reminder not just of the inherent instability of political regimes, but also of the seemingly endless ability of the citizens themselves under these regimes to adjust to dramatic ideological change. The institutional relationship that Fonty himself enjoys with the building addresses this second point, and ensures that what might remain symbolically representative of a collective political idea is instead shifted manifestly onto the level of the personal and the individual. In other words, the Treuhand, formerly the Haus der Ministerien, before that the Reichsluftfahrtministerium, is, as well as being a potent symbol, shown to be the site for the particular activities of an individual, who is inevitably called to account by the description of his past and by his personal memories of different historical periods in which he has been active.

It is perhaps too easy to forget that Fonty, privileged by his intertextual slipperiness, is, as well as being an historical witness to events, also entirely complicit in their making. His familiarity with the mechanism of the paternoster, the endless corridors and the countless rooms of the Treuhand is the result not of his faithfulness to an institution but of the fickleness in his character which permits him to transfer seamlessly from one to the next. The text does not suggest that he has any qualms about taking up the offer of employment which Hoftaller has engineered for him post Wende, and it is to be
presumed that he displays a similar lack of compunction in taking up employment in the first place as well as in the 1945 changeover. Self-preservation is always higher on his list of priorities than anything else: when he is recalled from the threat of active service at the beginning of the war to take up a post as a reporter in the Reichsluftfahrtministerium, he is ‘so dankbar wie gedankenlos’ (73), concerned only that the job remove him from danger. Evidently he is not a hero, as he himself recognises, but these recollections also reveal a fundamental moral cowardice only partially redeemed by his acts of resistance. The pattern continues when Hoftaller, who has been responsible from the outset for securing Fonty employment, manages to find him part time work as a file courier in the Treuhand. The narrators’ record suggests that Fonty’s reaction to his gaining employment is an overwhelmingly positive one, apart from the slight disappointment that his status as ‘freier Mitarbeiter’ does not entitle him to a room of his own in the building.

A charitable reading would excuse Fonty this undisguised delight in his improved financial situation, which shows a material concern seemingly as free from ideological qualms as that of his wife, who ‘sah sich auf einem Treppchen zu beginnenden Wohlstand und lobte die Treuhand als “hochanständig”.’ (525) As pensioners who have lived through hard times, they are understandably gratified by the sudden change in fortune. Some of the most comical and gently ironic moments of the text occur when Fonty is brought into contact with his extended western environment, for example in his childlike enjoyment of the McDonald’s experience, ultimate symbol of rampant capitalism. The narrative does not question the positive face of freedom, the initial naively incredulous reaction to a previously unattainable world. Fonty’s reaction is,
however, far more problematic if we consider that he is intensely alert not just to ideological currents but also to his own potential to accept or reject them. And, in consciously accepting the demands that each one makes on him, he is arguably responsible for his personal exploitation of a political system in a way that Emilie, who subscribes wholesale to the narrators' ironic description of the ‘Wohltäter Treuhand’ (525), is not. The question of Fonty’s responsibility for his past is a narrative concern that extends to a much more general exploration of issues of historical awareness inevitably bound up with issues of responsibility and guilt. Consistent with the indirect mode as a whole, these issues tend to remain subterranean in the text, relying on the reader to reapply her/his knowledge to give substance to what is deliberately left implicit and unspoken in the narrative itself. The profound anxiety with the past, unvoiced but all the more insistently established for that, plays a significant role in how the reader responds to Fonty. Whilst the narrators underplay or overlook his guilt, there is at the same time plenty of room for a critical assessment of his personal history. Whether this critical perspective is developed enough to counter the suspicion that Grass himself is overly indulgent of his creation is perhaps questionable: nevertheless, the weight of the past is something that we are required at all times to feel and remember.

On what grounds, then, is Fonty’s guilt established? For a start, on a non-political level, the facts of his life speak for themselves. The appearance of Madeleine half way through the book is evidence of his infidelity, but more importantly, her testimony suggests the real consequences that the affair has had for Madeleine’s grandmother, who ‘kahlgeschoren und im Schandhemd durch die Straßen von Lyon getrieben wurde, weil sie von einem deutschen Soldaten schwanger war.’ (434) Madeleine describes in

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89 See Ute Brandes, Günter Grass (Berlin: Volker Spiees, 1998). Brandes draws out the referential possibilities of the historical field, suggesting that the literary, historical and biblical allusions serve above all to establish a textual terrain of ‘deutschem Terror, Mord, Schuld. Die Wiedervereinigung steht im Schatten von Auschwitz.’ (p. 91)
uncomfortable detail the lifelong sentence of shame under which her grandmother lived “nach so kurzem Glück” (423): no longer acceptable in French society, she spends the rest of her life hidden away ‘in einem einsamen, kaum noch bewohnten Dorf in den Cevennen’ (421) and “wollte nicht, wollte nicht unter Menschen sein’.” (423) The almost total lack of bitterness that her grandmother apparently displays towards “‘einem Soldaten [...] den sie als ein wenig schwärmerisch und absolut unmilitärisch in Erinnerung hatte und dem sie nichts Böses nachsagen wollte” (423) is reproduced in Madeleine’s own uncomfortably light-hearted tones. Her description of the little windowless house in which the grandmother lives out her days from the time of the affair is unbearably romantic: she is “‘sicher, Monsieur Wuttke, daß Ihnen grand-mère’s Festung gefallen würde’” (423-4) because “[a]lles ist voll Geheimnis dort” and especially because there is “[e]in alter Hugenottenfriedhof” (424) behind the house. Madeleine’s excitement at imagining her grandfather in her grandmother’s backyard now is ironic in the face of the evidence of his convenient disappearance from her grandmother’s life then. Twice we are reminded of his failure to make any contact following his abrupt departure. Evidence for his existence is nowhere to be found - ‘kein Photo, kein Brief, nicht einmal eine Postkarte’ (421): instead he leaves some copies of Fontane, the author through whom he has staged his resistance by means of readings over the airwaves. This, for Madeleine Blondin, is his woefully inadequate legacy, through which she attempts to keep the memory of her love alive in an entirely unfamiliar nineteenth century language. As an old woman, reading Irrungen, Wirrungen with her granddaughter (whose love of and academic interest in Fontane is inherited in this way and later provides her with a ready-made link to her grandfather), she is reminded by the letter episode in the text “‘daß mir Théodore keine Briefe geschrieben hat. Pas un mot!’” (426) Although she herself well knows that discovery of letters on her person would have made things worse for her, this is not the point. Only recalling
the silence of her erstwhile and only lover does she momentarily become "ein wenig bitter." (426) The narrative, in Madeleine’s nostalgic recapitulation of the affair, points to Fonty’s guilt without ever explicitly passing judgement on it. In the space between the romance of Madeleine’s storytelling and the actual events she recalls, the reader cannot fail to detect an uncomfortable irony. This irony is extended still further by the fact that this conversation between them is the prelude to Madeleine’s ceremonious bestowal of a medal for bravery upon her grandfather for his contribution to the Résistance, a medal that he accepts and wears, however coyly hidden from view, with pride.

Perhaps more ironically still, it is Madeleine who offers her grandfather the possibility of liberation from Hoftaller, who is as much Fonty’s conscience as his persecutor. When she arrives on the scene, Fonty is still very much in thrall to his ‘Tagundnachtsschatten’, but almost instantly the image of the two figures timelessly linked together (discussed in the first part of this chapter, p. 104-5) is dissolved, and replaced with that of the granddaughter, to the disconcertion of the narrators:

Nicht ohne Neid müssen wir anerkennen, daß die Enkeltochter vom Holze des Großvaters war. [...] Sie entsprachen einander eingespielt und hätten unsereins kaum bemerkt; nein, wir vom Archiv wären fehl am Platz und womöglich für kindische Eifersucht anfällig gewesen, wenn wir das Paar so eng beieinander gesehen hätten. (440)

The decreasing importance of Hoftaller is highly significant, when we think that at the beginning of the narrative it is invariably he who prompts Fonty’s memories of the past and his own role in it. It is Hoftaller who reminds Fonty of “‘Dresden und die Folgen, Lyon und die Folgen...’” (379), and who eventually arranges the first meeting with the flesh and blood consequences of his past dalliances. On a more general level, it is Hoftaller who presses Fonty to consider morally dubious views held in the past, and who in conversation exposes his friend’s moral weakness. Often the protagonist’s guilt is illuminated by means of Fontane’s biography. For example, Hoftaller mocks Fonty/Fontane’s claim to philosemitism by quoting an extract from one of Fontane’s
letters that transforms him into “‘nem stinknormalen Antisemiten.’” (61) The ensuing
dialogue reveals much about Fonty’s own response to the past as a set of circumstances
justifiable in recollection by virtue of their historical specificity, something altogether
contradicted by his conception of the ‘ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen’:

“Wir haben sie erlebt, diese Zeiten. Ich weiß, Tallhover, ich weiß. [...] Nicht jeden
meiner Briefe möchte ich geschrieben oder so geschrieben haben. Es war wohl die Zeit
damals...”
“Schwamm drüber!” rief Hoftaller.
“Fürchte, diese Schande wird bleiben...”
“Ach was, Fonty! Damit leben wir. Gibt ja noch andere Sachen, die vor sich hin ticken,
zum Beispiel...” (61)

Fonty is aware of, though resigned to, his guilt and his own weakness. Therefore,
although he regrets his behaviour, his fatalistic approach does not permit him to
acknowledge responsibility for it. Instead he takes refuge in an historical
contextualisation of his actions antithetical to his otherwise intertextually wrought
identity, which gives him all the appearance of a character outside the realm of history
altogether. ‘Es war die Zeit damals’ is, thus, a response which is more disingenuous
than inadequate, because it suggests an historically immanent knowledge that only
permits wisdom in retrospect, and Fonty surely cannot sustain any proclamation of
innocence against the background of his own externalised, historically founded
identification. Given that his use of a life and literature of a different age is both
knowing and cynical, his recourse to a historicist explanation of his past rings hollow,
and is indefensible from a moral point of view. In any case, his protest is not supported
by the textual evidence afforded by the retrospective and recollective narrative mode in
which the contemporary character is positioned, which suggests that the passing of time
has effected no change more dramatic in its central character than the physical
inconveniences of growing old. Certainly, he does not ultimately shoulder his own
burden of guilt, despite the best efforts of Hoftaller. His own way of coming to terms
with his own and his country's past is to disappear with his granddaughter to France, which as a personal redemption leaves much to be resolved.

I have considered the nature of Fonty's guilt in some depth because it seems to me that the figure of Fonty is itself a critical aid to the text's articulation of historical concerns to a present day German political constellation. In Fonty, the narrative finds a way of making concrete an historical metaphor which is deeply problematic to a reader looking for a resolution of historical guilt and an assurance that human nature at least offers the possibility of (if not succeeds in bringing about) positive change. The symbolic force of the eternal recurrence is reflected in the portrayal of the central character and his 'guardian', who is a living embodiment of Fonty’s mantra that "[i]m Prinzip ändert sich nichts." (Hoftaller's words, 771) Hoftaller, like Fonty himself an audacious intertext, differs significantly from Schädlich's original character in that he is denied the however undignified and shameful luxury of death which Tallhover is permitted in suicide. Tallhover, vows Grass, 'kann nicht sterben' and by the end of the text his Hoftaller is a somewhat sibylline figure, damned to eternal "'Aubendienst'". (760)

Where Schädlich introduces in his protagonist a developing moral awareness which eventually overcomes the automatic desire to obey and adapt to changing regimes, Grass gives the reader no cause to believe that the circle is to be breached: though Hoftaller is weary of his fate, he does not offer resistance to it. Nonetheless, there is no corresponding narrative capitulation to this sense of inevitability. Indeed, as I have tried to show, in reading we are required always to be uncomfortably sensitive to the traumatic events of German history and mindful of the individual and collective contribution to processes of ideological change. In this sense, the self-replicating patterns of the various intertexts both reproduce and criticise these processes.

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90 See Günter Grass, Zunge zeigen: ein Tagebuch in Zeichnungen, Prosa und einem Gedicht (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1988), where Grass discusses Schädlich's character, concluding, '[i]ch werde Schädlich schreiben: nein, Tallhover kann nicht sterben.' (pp. 26-7)
The voice of scepticism

I want to turn now to the concept of ‘ein weites Feld’, the gesture of impotence that Effi’s father makes at the end of Effi Briest. In that text, the phrase signifies resignation, and perhaps more importantly still, a fundamental lack of understanding of a wider world in whose mechanisms an explanation of Effi’s tragedy is to be found. In the new text, the phrase is reworked, and the ‘weites Feld’ comes to stand both as a tribute to Fontane and as an indication of the wide field of literary and more general cultural significations out of which the new text is elaborated. Where the Fontane expression is therefore suggestive of a world beyond comprehension, the Grass reformulation is rather indicative of a world whose inner logic is questioned by the endlessness of the significations and placed altogether into doubt by characters and text alike. Rather than fail to discover the answer to a constant ‘why’, as Fontane’s resigned characters do, these characters (particularly Fonty, whose philosophical approach is most akin to the aesthetic of the text) validate scepticism as the one legitimate response to any historical development. The questioning itself, in other words, is reclaimed as an assertion, and is hence positive in a way that Fontane’s never was. This fundamental lack of certainty is deployed as both a political and an aesthetic challenge to the reader, discomfiting as well as disorienting: we could go further and say that it is the governing strategy of the text, a methodologically invoked indistinctness extensively present in, for example, the blurred (double) identities of the majority of characters, the intersecting modes of fiction and reality, the temporalities indistinguishable as past or present, and so on. Within these various frameworks, each of which engages with the reader’s own critical

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91 See Dieter Stolz, “‘Nomen est omen’: Ein weites Feld von Günter Grass’, Zeitschrift für Germanistik, n.s. 2 (1997), 321-35. Stolz’s account of the text’s citational mode is constructed largely around textual references that draw out the many-layered possibilities of the title. Rolf Geißler also analyses the significance of Briest’s phrase in the new text, and concludes that ‘die Geschichts- und Lebensereignisse, wenn sie offen bleiben für ein poetisch gedachtes “Patchwork” nicht einer gleichmacherischen Vernichtung preisgeben, sondern erwachen zu neuer Kreativität und Lebendigkeit und fördern ein anderes Denken als das, was das “weite Feld” zulässt.’ Geißler, ‘Ein Ende des “weiten Feldes”?’, Weimarer Beiträge, 45 (1999), 65-81 (p. 76).
response to doubt as a mode of thought, the political critique of the *Wende* is staged. The relationship between doubt, as an abstract notion, and political response to rapid change, as a concern of characters and text alike, is the means by which political unease is heard in the text. I would like now to look in detail at one episode that seems to me to dwell in particular depth on this issue. The episode is striking not least because it extrapolates these concerns from out of an environment which traditionally forecloses doubt: the church wedding, central to which is unconditional love, of one's spouse and of God.

Martha's wedding to the entrepreneur Heinz-Martin Grundmann is a heavily allegorical episode that is as much a union of two German states as one between two individuals. The huge gulf between the 'arme Ostmaus' (291) and her soon-to-be husband is as much ideological as economic in nature, and the celebration is as awkward a witness to the confrontation between two vastly different cultures as is to be expected. The union of East and West, as well as symbolically acted out by the bride and groom, is manifestly and painfully achieved in the coming together under one roof of individuals from both sides of the wall: the presence of Friedrich, Fonty's belligerent son, at least partially unites the Wuttke family (of the other absent sons, one is dead, the other refusing to attend); and Grundmann’s daughter, a preposterously self-confident student of literature, and her dour aunt Frau von Bunsen, further balance the guest list. This is, let us not forget, one of the few occasions in the text where there is any representation from West Germany, and apart from the later appearance of Madeleine, from the West as a whole. In itself, the conversation between the two sides, who are drawn up, as it were, in battle lines, is indicative of an all too precarious relationship based on a notional German identity that serves only to point up ideological difference and mutual mistrust. From this point of view alone, the episode is worthy of comment,
because it ironically exposes the phenomenon of a lack of a common cultural language despite a shared mother tongue.

Under such circumstances, politics, rather than love, are at the forefront of everyone’s mind, and even when the bride and groom are pressed to talk about how they met, the story is more emphatically suggestive of political divide than of romantic union. It is Friedrich, the glowering easterner turned westerner, who takes up the theme first:


Deeply cynical, overlaid with irony as the question is, it nonetheless accords perfectly with Grundmann’s tale of the first meeting, remembering and grossly elaborating his chivalry in inviting the grateful woman “mit immer noch leerem Teller” (293) to eat with his family in the area reserved for holidaymakers from the West. Grundmann is expansive in his recollection of the scene; for Martha, however, “[m]ir war das ziemlich peinlich.” (293) Not surprisingly, the story is greeted with general embarrassment. It is left to Inge Scherwinski, Martha’s childhood friend, to break the silence with a perfectly inappropriate toast to the reunified Germany. The episode is full of discordant moments such as these, none more so than the most direct conversation about the reunification around the table, in which Friedrich calls for “‘eine klare Offenlegung der Schuld’” (295), going on to say that “‘[e]in solches Bekenntnis würde ich gern […] von dir, Vater, hören – und zwar ohne dein übliches Wenn und Aber.’” (295)

Fonty’s reply mocks his son’s evangelical stance:

“Alles furchtbar richtig!” rief er. “Doch die Schuld ist ein weites Feld und die Einheit ein noch weiteres, von der Wahrheit gar nichts zu reden. Wenn du aber Schriftliches für deinen Verlag haben willst, könnt ich dir mit einer Auswahl meiner Kulturbundvorträge helfen; sind zwar keine Schuldbeekenntnisse und Wahrheitsergüsse, handeln aber vom Leben, das mal so und mal so ist.” (295-6)
Fonty’s response to this clear declaration of righteousness on his son’s part is as ever effusively, grandly evasive, typically avoiding presenting an actually contradictory position to what has been said, whilst at the same time managing implicitly to question his son’s assurance. Friedrich’s desire to see those in the former GDR, including his own family, admitting to their collaboration in and perpetuation of the “‘Existenzlüge’” (295) of the communist regime is indicative of a confidence to pass judgement from a Western perspective, and at the same time exposes his assumption of an overarching and dubiously founded authority. As a self-elected spokesman for some sort of political ‘truth’, his approach offers a dialectical (and comically undistinguished) counterpart to his father’s eclectic motions around a “‘Leben, das mal so und mal so ist.’” (296) Unsurprisingly, Friedrich’s objection to his father’s wedding speech is mounted on the grounds that it consisted only of “‘Zweideutigkeiten [...]. So kommen wir nicht zusammen.’” (295) For him, coming together, in other words, the achievement of unity (political or otherwise) is dependent on advocating one clear position, which seems therefore to preclude the possibility both of dialogue and, more worryingly, dissent.

The marriage is an uncomfortable reminder of Martha’s own tendency towards whole-hearted and, we suspect, undiscriminating proclamations of allegiance to various ideologies. As she herself admits, “‘beim Zweifeln, da brauch ich Nachhilfe im Prinzip, da hapert es bei mir, immer noch...’” (306) Replacing her former total, unwavering belief in the Party with a religious zealousness, Protestant then Catholic, she finally adopts the good life as rich widow of the unfortunate Grundmann. Fonty, at least, knows her well: “‘[a]ber so ist sie nun mal, meine Mete, immer kolossal überzeugt.’” (278) It is no wonder that Fonty’s speech, pondering his daughter’s hasty conversion from Protestantism to Catholicism in heavily pointed references to Fontane’s Franziska in Graf Petöfy, is both too allusive and too uncommitted for Friedrich’s taste. Fontane’s tale of the unhappy marriage between the distinguished and aged count Adam Petöfy
and the vivacious, impressionable actress Franziska is brought into play once and again
during this episode. The literary intertext attests all too closely to the circumstances of
this wedding, and indeed to the issues that preoccupy the text more generally. It invokes
in shorthand the tragic evolution of an ill-matched union, where cultural and
generational differences, instead of being smoothed away, come all the more strongly to
the fore. At the end of his speech, Fonty’s response to the cross-boundary marriage is a
wry exhortation to “‘Ontage!’” (283): again, the intertext is Petöfy, this time Pater
Feßler, and its inappropriateness causes general consternation among the wedding party.
However, in the light of Friedrich’s subsequent espousal of a political and cultural
conviction (which amounts to a tyrannical desire to see his Eastern counterparts give up
the right, retrospectively, not just to legitimate the political foundation of the regime,
but also the cultural values to which they have subscribed under it), a non-specific
renunciation of divisive ideological (political or religious) beliefs is shown to be a rather
more balanced, logical, and infinitely more humane response to a move towards unity.
The wedding party is witness to the fact that such a unity, at least now, is an ideal all too
obviously unachievable practically as well as symbolically. The narrator, here unusually
a single male voice, lends the episode a more focused critical perspective than is usually
permitted by the collective identity under which the narrative shelters. In his role as
Trauzeuge, he does not only testify to the wedding and to the priest’s gloomy
observation that “[w]ir kennen uns nicht. Wir erkennen einander nicht” (312): he also
makes manifest the responsibilities of the narrators in recreating the uncomfortable
atmosphere of the episode (‘[e]inmal nahm mich Fonty beiseite: “Schreibt, was ihr
wollt, aber stutzt mir den Grundmann nicht zur Karikatur.”’ (313)), and lends further
support to Fonty’s own sceptical position. When Martha’s school friend Inge proposes
that they drink to “‘Deutschland, einig Vaterland’” (295), the narrator emphatically
states: ‘[s]olch ein Toast wäre mir nicht gelungen.’ (295)
In this episode, however, it is not Fonty, but the priest, Bruno Matull, who finally steals the show. As he prepares to speak, Martha, sotto voce, comments that "[d]er hat es als Priester nicht leicht mit sich." (299) She is right, for the priest proceeds to confess, if that is the right word, to a personal reassessment of his own perspective through Martha’s desperate plea for guidance, and his eventual attainment of a certain belief:


The priest’s short speech engages intensively and obsessively with the question of belief and its ‘Kehrseite’ doubt, unequivocally rejecting the former in the context where it is usually most assured, that of religion. Furthermore, it is Martha’s ‘Glaubenskraft’ and ‘Glaubensstärke’, her unequivocal need for certainty in belief, that forces him to assent to the other side of that coin. The priest’s assenting to doubt is a paradigmatic moment in the text, a positive reclamation of a belief in the validity of doubt. At the same time, however, his proclamation is rendered in the conventional patterns and rhetoric of the church, producing a comical disparity between words and tone that is faithful to the text’s tendency to subvert established patterns of interpretation and understanding for the reader. He continues to borrow biblical images, is faced with "'ein wüstes Feld, reich an Disteln'". (302) His "'zweifelnde Seele'" is "'gelabt'" (302) by Fonty, the doubter. And he pledges to spread the word, a different word, namely, and incongruously from the lips of a priest, "'Zweifel zu säen.'" (303) The priest’s lexicon is familiar, his message, though, shockingly, grotesquely unexpected. Balanced between comedy and crisis, his ‘sermon’ dominates the wedding party and the episode.
The wedding party is in a sense a centrepiece for the text’s critical concern. It is the scene where characters come most forcefully and physically into contact and confrontation with one another: the priest is wrestled to a sitting position only by loosening his fingers one by one from their claw-like grip on the table edge; Friedrich’s distaste for his sister’s nostalgic recollections of socialism is tangible when he leaps to his feet and thumps the table in fury; Fonty’s head-to-head with Grundmann over who should foot the bill is a matter of honour for Fonty, a financial trifle for his Western son-in-law. As well as much direct dialogue, the scene depends for its effect on this sort of visual detail (the physical struggle to overcome the priest, the banging hand on the table, the wink to the waiter to make sure of the bill) to convey the deeply felt tension in the meeting, all of which is manifestly of a political nature. Even Fonty’s choice of venue goes against the wishes of Grundmann for a ‘guten Italiener’ (277): he chooses a setting both closer to home (in the Prenzlauerberg, his own stomping ground) and thematically closer to his heart. As well as fulfilling his Wuttke-felt desire to have his daughter’s reception in a suitably grandiose environment, the intertextual possibilities of the Offenbach-Stuben provide a deliciously resonant setting for the meal. In this themed restaurant inspired by the works and productions of the composer Jacques Offenbach, the episode, politically focused as it is, unfolds along the customary trellis of high culture.

The proliferation of mythical themes that form the basis of Offenbach’s opera bouffe is a perfect backdrop to the wedding party, the intertext lending a mischievous dimension to Fonty’s demeanour throughout. Emilie has only with difficulty talked him out of ordering the themed meal ‘Orpheus in der Unterwelt’, and into the more fittingly named ‘Schöne Helena’ (280), and later, with even more heavy significance, he calls the waiter to bring in dessert, “'sonst mißrät uns die Hochzeit zum Schlachtfest, bei dem am Ende doch noch ‘Ritter Blaubart’ auftischt.’” (307) Offenbach’s opera Barbe-Bleue,
written in 1866, is a comic re-working of the Bluebeard myth, in which a young bride discovers the awful secret of her husband's former wives, piled up in bloody heaps behind a locked door. The bride is rescued just as she is about to suffer the same fate, and Bluebeard is duly put to death. The Bluebeard myth consolidates the themes of the episode, supplying an intertextual commentary on its representation of (real and allegorical) marriage. Martha is the innocent young bride, Grundmann the grotesquely rich and powerful patriarch. Like the figure of Adam in Fontane's *Graf Petöfy*, Bluebeard is an embarrassingly apt fictional resource for the occasion. And the double death, intertextually invoked by both characters, offers Grundmann up in the text as a hapless, ghostlike figure, already condemned for the reader as he treads in the footsteps of his mythical and literary precursors. The intertext thus mocks his image in the text as a manifestly solid and successful businessman. The Offenbach motif also offers a counterpart to the visually realistic setting and dialogue, ensuring that a highly fictional dimension continues to run through and stylise the episode and its characters. In other words, the wedding party is an intertextual performance, and so is part of the same performance that gives form to the text as a whole, even whilst it brings to the fore issues of a political nature that tend to remain subterranean elsewhere. Offenbach's satirical works find their critical force in the use of classical myth and mythology: this text, too, draws insistently on a cultural legacy as a way of mounting its contemporary critique.

**The Wende: Ein weites Feld in context**

*Ein weites Feld* came about in response to a period of momentous social upheaval in Germany, at a time when the society as a whole was seeking to legitimate itself once again in the face of rapid and destabilising change. The political map of Germany was redrawn with very little time for reflection or adjustment, and in the face of
overwhelming euphoria and pressure to commit to the past the dividing line between the two countries, dissenting voices were for the most part subsumed. The Wende brought about a rapid move towards cohabitation, most obviously of East and West, but also of past and present, in the historical resonances brought very much to the fore in the reunification, and of culture and politics. The new united Germany was unrecognisable as a single nation with a unified political voice, and so a cultural history recognisable to both sides of the divide was considerably more convincing a drum beat than a political call to arms which ran the risk of alienating, in different ways, both the former East and the former West. This movement towards literature and all things cultural is shown in Ein weites Feld to be the most convincing platform on which to erect a force for political change, unifying the two peoples of Germany. For a start, Fonty himself, as a lecturer, provides the central image of a culture in debate with a previous humanistic legacy. But Fonty’s contemporary role as cultural spokesman is part of a proliferation of cultural events put on to celebrate (and give legitimization to) the reunification. His ‘lecture’ in the Kulturbrauerei is ‘nur einer von vielen Terminen im laufenden Programm’, which includes ‘Live-Musik-Tage, Kabarett, Dichterlesungen, Ausstellungen und Straßentheater, sogenannte Workshops und Podiumsgespräche, was gerade – und besonders in Wendezeiten – aktuell war’. (745) The pantomime of the Katte tragedy performed by a group of students in the streets of Potsdam is one contribution to a day marking the reinterment of Friedrich Wilhelm and Friedrich II, which typically sees politics performed and refracted through various types of artistic medium. The reading of the poem, ‘Auf der Treppe von Sanssouci’, written for the occasion of the seventieth birthday of Adolph von Menzel and celebrating the unity of the new Germany, is another. Martha’s collection of classical records is predominantly German, among other things ‘die drei großen B’ (719), Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Beethoven is, of course, a critical unifying figure: note the manifest importance of the
national anthem (witnessed by Fonty and Hoftaller on the two most momentous celebrations, New Year 1989-90, 64, and the date of the official political reunification, 473) which joins the two nations politically in the name of Beethoven and Schiller, a common heritage of cultural musical and literary giants. The text, in its revisitation of the broad sweep of Germany's literature and history, on the one hand bears witness to the tendency, general but particularly at such a point as this, a radical moment on the cultural and political landscape of the society, to seek legitimation in the past and in culture. This tendency is not so much suggestive of a retreat from a political position as a need to situate it in a broader, seemingly more solid and eternally relevant, context.

But, by the same token, as witness to this movement the text also expresses its own need to confirm its position in a social, literary context more stable and more enduring than its immediate political environment, the events of the Wende. Grass shows himself in every way as needful of this legitimation from the past as the society from which he takes his immediate subject and inspiration. The dense intertext of Ein weites Feld summons into the writing a certain authority, a weight of culture and philosophy without which the text cannot express the enormity of its actual subject. That is to say, the subject of the text has everything to do with a German historical awareness which the intertext allows to be voiced, and everything to do with the author's desire to legitimate his own position as commentator on and critic of the radical social change to which he gives literary voice. Thus, whilst the structural form of the intertext is required to model this sudden coming together of so many different aspects of a culturally and politically divided Germany, the resonance which it brings into the text is also exploited on the level of the power game played by the author as contemporary critic.

This use of culture and the past to articulate political concerns does seem to be a marked characteristic of German fiction (as opposed, for example, to Anglo-American fiction, which seems not to blur the boundaries between literature and politics to
anything like the same extent), and consequently in Germany's reading public there is a more marked tendency to look directly to literature as well as to the usual media avenues for an understanding of political change and political debate in general. The scandal surrounding this text on its publication testifies to the high profile that literature enjoys, as well as to the level of respect as of responsibility accorded to authors writing in German on a socio-political as well as a purely literary level. The reputation for fiercely articulated political critique through the medium of fiction is one which has informed Grass's oeuvre from the first, and in this sense Ein weites Feld has fulfilled, even surpassed, expectation, engaging polemically with the Wende on a resolutely political level from within the most literary intertextual framework. The use of Fontane as the most powerful single strand of what is a quite virtuosic intertextual aesthetic has been criticised and puzzled over by critics and readers since the novel's appearance, because it does not initially appear to have much, if any, bearing on a text whose subject is so contemporary. In fact, the use of Fontane is not a miscalculation on Grass's part, and critics who latched on to Grass's explanation that his fascination with the Prussian author came about because of a jealous dream (about the author and his own wife Ute) and was thus not enough to sustain a text of this length and subject, have, I would suggest, stopped short of the implications of this figure as a critical force in the text. Fontane's own part in the cultural history of Germany is enacted through Fonty in this text, and a knowledge of his biography and literature is essential if the reader is to bring the new text into focus.

In fact, as I hope that I have shown in my discussion of the intertextual structure of Ein weites Feld, he gives the text a double critical focus. Fontane's reputation is ambivalent, as a personality with many internal contradictions, and with a body of literature that reflects these. On the one hand, he is the acceptable face of Prussian liberalism. Modest, unemphatic, scrupulous, and above all humanistic, his presence and
his literature provide relief to the ‘blood and iron’ ethos characteristic of Bismarck’s Prussia. In particular, his quietly ironic perspective on society is the means by which a critical voice is enabled to emerge here, and we see this in Grass’s use of both his private and public correspondence and, of course, his literature. On the other hand, Fontane is at root a conformist under Bismarck’s regime, distrustful of radical progress, not without anti-semitic promptings, and, mindfully taking care of his own career, prepared to do some spying when required. Thus his great friendship with Friedlaender is marred by various comments made elsewhere that show Fontane has also unquestioningly adopted anti-Jewish sentiments gaining currency in late nineteenth century Germany. Likewise, his credentials as a proto-feminist, based in his great literary female figures, Effi Briest, Lene Nimptsch, Mathilde von Möhring, Frau Jenny Treibel, are undermined both by the endings of his novels, which ultimately refuse to permit the potential for change, and by the shadow cast by rumours of his own less than scrupulous extra-marital activities. Without the insight that these ambivalent aspects to Fontane lend to the new text, it is difficult both to hear the relevance of Fontane to a present day readership, and so also to be equipped to reinstate his figure as part of a contemporary critique. In the new text, the Fontane/Wuttke figure is a presence equally suggestive of denunciation of as of conformity to a set of political circumstances. And his duplicity is critical to a two-fold critique of the Wende.

Essentially, it is this double focus wherein the reader is granted the necessary leverage from which to form a critical opinion of the Wende and the circumstances under which reunification is achieved. Does the protagonist, witnessing the events from 1989-91, offer a courageous alternative voice to a celebratory gung-ho process of change, or does he rather breathe a cowardly conforming sigh of assent to its inevitable path? The answer lies in the fact that he does both at one and the same time, and this, for the reader, is the point of critical focus of the text, where s/he must engage actively
with the central figure as with the issues which his problematic presence raises in the
text. Fonty is a dissenting voice in that he casts doubt on the validity of a process of
change which is given the name reunification but which, in its textual representation, is
better thought of as an imperfect and hurriedly enforced cohabitation of two states, with
little consideration for the psychological realignment (of one side in particular) which it
entails. But at the same time he is complicit in its making, cynically unwilling or
fatalistically unable to cast himself as a political or cultural outsider, since he is, like
those around him, very much of his time. The Fontane presence, brought into the text as
a singular intertextual strand, engenders in the new context a fundamentally divided
central figure who at a stroke forecloses the possibility of singular perspectives. In the
text, this self-contradictoriness is a way of being which we see in the majority of the
characters. Fonty is one of several characters who cannot resolve internal conflict;
Hofter (at once good and evil) is another, the priest at the wedding (who wavers
between religious belief and doubt) a third. At the same time, there are a number of
characters who entertain shifting singular perspectives, such as Martha (whose
communist convictions turn to religious and finally capitalist fervour), and Emilie (who
accepts each regime with unquestioning eagerness). The only two characters in the text
who might be said to adhere to a singular morality, and as such remain true to self as
intellectuals outside the political or cultural spectrum, are Uwe Johnson and Fonty’s
fictional correspondent, Professor Freundlich: the former dies in exile, the latter
commits suicide. And the lack of reliable singular perspectives is not, as we have seen,
just a characteristic of the characters who people the text, but an overwhelming quality
of the textual structure, which inevitably sets up an array of cohabiting but unresolved
significations for the reader in place of a neatly self-resolving narrative lead. In this
sense, the text cannot be absorbed unquestioningly, not least since its commitment to an
intertextual aesthetic assures a knowing confirmation of its own status as literature, as at
once bound to and striving to break free from the bed of literary and cultural associations with which it is energised.

Thus, the presence of Fontane allows us to hear a two-fold political critique that, significantly, emanates from a literary historical source. This in turn enables us to register the nature of literature as an institution among other social institutions, and the position of this text within that configuration of cultural forces. The intertext recollects forcefully a cultural literary heritage as part of the contours of a historicopolitical landscape, and in drawing the two so closely together, acknowledges the contingency and interrelatedness of literature within the broader cultural and political domain. This acknowledgement, implicit in the text's structural commitment to a web of (primarily literary) reference, is, of course, also made explicit in the narrative mode of the text. The 'wir' of the Fontane Archiv represents a collective body of narrators in the text, a literary body neurotically engaged in furthering Fontane research by whatever means. In method and commitment this literary institution thus has everything in common with the manic surveillance archive that was the Stasi. The narrators, obsessively documenting every move that Fonty makes and every sentence that he utters, perfectly mimic the bureaucratic rigour of the Stasi. And as with the political body, the narrators' utter lack of understanding of their charge, their haplessness when faced with the task of assessing the wider picture that Fonty represents, leads the reader to suspect that the surveillance process itself has attained more importance than any results that analysis from data collected might once have yielded. Their desire to record and document everything possible about the protagonist comes out of their instinct as archivists, but is a wholly inadequate response to their object of study. Their astonishing capacity for detail is exercised at the expense of insight, so that their plane of vision is altogether

92 The inanity of the Stasi is illustrated in Thomas Brussig's satirical novel, Helden wie wir (Berlin: Volk und Welt, 1996). At one point, the narrator, out on his first surveillance operation and following orders to write everything down, says: 'wir saßen stundenlang rum, schwiegen und machten Notizen darüber, was passierte. Meistens passierte nichts. Aber darum ging es nicht.' (p. 175)
restricted to a level that precludes the realm of imagination. Fonty, as we have seen, functions primarily on this level of imagination, hence the ironic mismatch between them. The narrators are subject to prescribed patterns of thought unequal to the mode of understanding demanded by an imaginative, intertextual narrative structure. Hence, unusually, by virtue of their collective restrictions they are outside of the aesthetic to which the reader responds, and the reader is vastly privileged above them. The reader has to follow the broader based intertextual narrative voice (the one which is the sum of the text rather than of its actual narrators) that has the potential to extend beyond the limited vision of the narrative ‘wir’. This is the ironic surface on which a knowing critique is exercised, where nothing can be taken at face value, and where the narrators are exposed as naive and unquestioning. The reader, responding to the naivety of the narrative voice, must read intertextually, and must, therefore, assent to Fonty’s world. This is a world of intimation, not affirmation, deviation rather than straightforwardness, and digression instead of progress. This is a world which casts doubt on the value of fact, the value to which the narrators themselves unthinkingly subscribe, and which proposes instead of this an imaginative, literary mode of thought and being. But at the same time, however much the text exploits the collective narrative voice for ironic effect, juxtaposing its sluggish bookishness with the agility of the intertext that leaves it behind, the Fontane Archiv nevertheless is still representative of the institution that is literature, and it is difficult not to reapply this irony to Ein weites Feld.

After all, the idea of the text rests on a desire to invoke the vast domain of German cultural significances in the service of a political critique, and in particular the text exploits as a grand project the idea of a literary heritage within which the forms and frameworks of contemporary literature are also to be found. We only need to look to the title itself to confirm the debt to a literary mode: the ‘weites Feld’ of the old Briest is not just a specific citation, but also a statement of intent on Grass’s part. On one level, it
articulates the particular problematic addressed in the text, namely the potential for
conformism and complicity which Briest shows in his response to Effi's downfall. It
explores this potential in its treatment of Fontane as the old Wuttke, still working in the
Treuhand. And, to some extent, it confirms this potential in its own commitment to a
literary tradition clearly part of a culture that is historically recognisably aligned with
dubious political ideologies. But at the same time, on a related level, the 'weites Feld'
gives expression to the endlessness of the intertextual field of reference that the text
inhabits, and articulates an altogether more radical message in a climate of rapid
political change. As an alternative to the acceleration towards unity and the dominant
singular vision of reunification as the right and only possible political path, Ein weites
Feld enacts an extraordinary feat of doubling. Wuttke and Hoftaller, Wuttke and
Fontane, Hoftaller and Tallhover constitute the central doublings of the text, supported
in this replicated structure by the author Grass and the Grass figure of the text, the
author Johnson and the Johnson figure, and countless other hybrid characters whose
Grassian form is allayed with a fictional Fontane persona. In the face of so much
certainty, Grass leads his reader into a fictional open space where nothing, not even the
temporal location of the text, can be ascertained. The field of force here is a multiple,
kaleidoscopic one which does not just welcome scepticism in the face of certainty, but
makes it the central condition of reading the text and celebrates it as the primary reading
experience. It is not surprising that the novel was generally received as a disparagement
of the Wende, and resented for being so. Everything in it conspires to suggest that the
Wende was, after all, not a unique event, an epiphany whose realisation may be able
somehow to heal the wounds of a German past, but rather itself a strangely prefigured
echo of the past, a confirmation of past mistakes rather than their resolution. Hence, the
novel, in its doubling mode, seems also to suggest a form of duplicity at work on the
political stage, headed by the 'Lügner' Kohl, but replicated in the widespread deception
taking cover under the mantle of hope for Germans, East and West, that the reunification signified.

The extraordinarily dense nexus of significations that we are required to respond to page by page indicates, on a structural level alone, a resistance to both the speed and the certainty of the political climate in which the text came about. For one thing, its sheer length and its often unbearably drawn out extemporisations offer us a vast literary space, where the point is often not so much to say things as to repeat them. Within this space, it tries to envisage and give the reader time to consider a different mode of thinking, a wide field of culture that is by its very nature not impermeable to alternative voices and multiple paths of exploration. In this sense, I hope to have shown how the use of the broad Fontane intertext in conjunction with the model of history which his way of thinking induces in the text can yield an altogether more positive account of this text, one which is critical of the status quo, but unlike Fontane, does also express a belief in the possibility of challenging and changing it. The intertext is itself double-edged, on the one hand introducing into the text this replicating pattern so fundamental to the critique of the Wende, and illustrating the conforming, complicit nature of the celebrations of reunification, and on the other hand liberating the reader from the constricting, circular motions which it itself stages, by enabling a multiple response of signification to the endlessly open text that it has become by virtue of this very structure.

Finally, though, I want to return to the specificity of the intertext, and suggest that this is where Ein weites Feld, grand project though it is, ultimately finds its limitation in the reader. The fact that the main, essential intertext is heard only within a German context is hugely exclusive. Even within Germany, the integral force of the Fontane intertext demarcates a reading elite versed in the nineteenth century author. And outside the German context, the text has been met with a singularly baffled response, not just
because of the dominant role of an author known by and large only in passing, but also because outside literary or historical academic circles, the referencing is too implicit to have much significance. Hence signification, upon which the text depends more than perhaps any piece of fiction written before it, does not find its way to the surface, because it does not find a response on any level. It is ironic that the title of the text has been rendered, in its English translation, as *Too far Afield*, because its field of reference is not, for the most part, accessible to a non-German general readership. Grass has found a way of writing about the relation of politics and literature within a cultural domain, using the intertext as a means of bringing fiction into debate with reality. The force of the text is to be found in the reader's appropriation of the intertext and understanding of its fictional and historical significations in respect of their own contemporary environment. But it remains to be seen whether the necessary binding of the project to a specifically German cultural terrain will ironically also have meant that the text does not itself permit the critical escape, promised by the intertext in theory, from the practical limitations that the intertextual structure imposes on the reader.

93 Günter Grass, *Too far Afield*, trans. by Krishna Winston (London: Faber and Faber, 2000). The reviews of the book in English reflect that sense of exclusion. Roger Boyes, in ‘United, he fails’, *The Times*, 22 November 2000, p. 17, concludes his assessment of a ‘long-winded work’ with the comment that ‘it is no slight to [the translator] to say that this is a book which should have stayed in German, part of an internal German discourse rather than the shining work of a great novelist.’ Shaun Whiteside, in ‘East is East, and West is West...’, *The Independent*, 11 November 2000, p. 15, discusses the lack of resonance for the English-speaking reader of such citations as ‘Gideon is better than Botho’ and observes that ‘perhaps inadvertently, *Too Far Afield* seems to suggest that reunification is a private matter for Germany alone, to be dealt with in a private language. Maybe a nation undergoing such a powerful shift needs to reassess its own continuities, on its own terms, before it can present a confident public face. Often, though, all the outsider can manage is a glimpse of something fleetingly understood. Grass's novel may deal with the perils of reunification, but it exemplifies the dangers that arise when you don't have a common currency.’
Herta Müller

1. Subverting Heimat: Niederungen

Herta Müller’s debut, the prose collection *Niederungen*, published to immediate critical acclaim in West Germany, enjoyed an unsurprisingly frosty reception among the Romanian-German community of the Swabian Banat. Müller’s depiction of rural life in the Banat, the focus of the collection, offends all received notions of a rural idyll traditionally upheld by writings from and about the land. Müller was quickly condemned as a *Nestbeschmutzer* for her unsparingly negative representation of a German enclave for whom issues of identity were (and are) a constant preoccupation. As a minority group with an already heightened awareness of the need for (positive) self-definition, the Romanian-German community regarded criticism from within the ranks as a moral and politically charged betrayal. Müller’s writing, emerging out of the close-knit community of her childhood, broke taboos by definitively hanging out its dirty laundry for the attention of the world at large. In the fifteen short stories which make up the collection, she requires her reader radically to reappraise pre-formed expectations preordained in literature portraying a rural upbringing, and of imagined or lived experience of rural life itself. In particular, she demythologises the notion of an idyllic Romanian Banat somehow beyond the reach of a totalitarian regime, and manages instead to imply an uncomfortable parallel between two equally repressive regimes: one, Ceauşescu’s Romania, and the other, the self-imposed one constituted by village life in the Banat.

There is no doubt that Müller’s commitment to uncovering political and cultural ‘truths’ distinguishes her as an author for whom personal integrity is everything: her

95 I discuss this word in more detail in relation to Jelinek, p. 25 and n. 29.  
own resistance to years of totalitarianism (and the difficulties and dangers to which she was consequently exposed) is well documented, and her high profile contributions to various political debates, notably Bosnia and the problem of rehabilitating ex-Stasi informers, are rigorously uncompromising. In this sense, her discussion in the text *In der Falle* of works by three authors (Theodor Kramer, Ruth Klüger and Inge Müller) as a homage to these authors and articulates the grounds of her own self-expectation, as these words make unequivocally clear: their texts ‘sind nicht bloß *Literatur* [...] weil gleichzeitig Beweis für die persönliche Integrität schreibender Personen. Sie stellen ohne Fingerzeig moralische Maßstäbe vor Augen, die unter drastischem, politischem Druck, in Situationen der Lebensbedrohung, nicht aufgegeben worden sind.’ In her fiction, this voice is at all times apparent, laying the ground for an exceptionally uncomfortable moral challenge to her reader. However, at the same time, Müller constantly achieves a remarkable lyrical intensity in her writing, which demands of us a response grounded as much in poetic sensibility as in socio-political (self-)criticism. Central to my analysis of Müller’s text *Niederungen* will be an understanding of the dialectical force brought to the stories in the narrating voice’s apprehension of its subject: so that for the reader, the text is a constant negotiation between the grotesque and the beautiful, between the elemental and the sophisticated, and between the immediate innocence of what is in most stories a child persona and the meta-awareness of the narrating adult. It is important to note, at the outset, that the text is not a stenography of childhood perceptions but a quotation from them. That is to say, we hear and reflect on the child’s voice, on its cognitive and poetic truth, which derives from its own incomprehension and precisely not from any sovereign narrative vantage point. In this sense, the ‘adult’ perspective, though textually definitively in place, is curiously non-retrospective, does not ‘know better’ in the way that we might expect.

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In particular, I suggest that the force of Müller's writing in these stories resides principally in the tension set up by what I see as a highly subversive inhabitation of certain traditional literary forms, most notably the *Heimat* genre, folklore, and autobiography. For the reader, these frameworks have a provocative rather than a corroborative function, since the narrative voice succeeds in undermining their foundations even in the act of embracing their literary characteristics. In the conscious use of these modes of literary communication, Müller makes the text an arena for debating with already established genres and in so doing sets up a critical focus for the reader. In the course of my discussion of the text, I shall be concerned to explore the consequences of this for the reader. I shall pay close attention to the narrative voice, and argue that it turns reading into a radically subjective experience, by manoeuvring the reader into a position that is, as it were, inside rather than outside the text, part of its making. In my analysis of this process, I shall suggest that the text, in prohibiting any attainment of cognitively privileging distance (such as we have found in Jelinek's work), allows the act of reading to reflect the same sensations of oppression that it itself seeks to illuminate in its representation of the hierarchical regime of the village with its particular focus on the figure of the child as the last element in a downward movement of power. My argument will be throughout informed by a consideration of what possibilities for resistance we can detect and make use of in Müller’s representation of power at work. To this end, I focus on and attempt to elucidate the process by which a critique is enabled via an installation of three generic intertexts: respectively *Heimat*, myth, and autobiography. The second two of these ideas are manifestly and fundamentally linked to *Heimat’s* concern with origin; both then, will be used as a means of articulating and broadening the scope of my primary focus, *Heimat* itself. In each case, I am interested especially in what I understand as a constant interplay between narratorial impotence, expressed in the precarious, often oblique or absented
figure of the child persona, and narratorial control, exercised in the entrapment of the reader into the text through identification with the narrative gaze.

**Heimat**

I want first to consider the various aspects of the *Heimat* tradition present in *Niederungen*, and ask to what extent the text can be seen to belong to, resist, or subvert this established literary tradition. It is problematic to read this text as a piece of overt *anti-Heimat* literature, not least because it is indebted to and draws inspiration from the genre. In any case, *Heimat* itself is a notoriously complex notion, and a simple definition has proven elusive to authors and critics alike; as Rüdiger Görner succinctly puts it: ‘[w]er sich über Heimat äußert, ist vorbelastet; denn er spricht von einer unmittelbar persönlichen Erfahrung. Zudem geht er mit einem Begriff um, der bis zur Unkenntlichkeit ideologisiert, verkitscht und stilisiert worden ist.’ His broad definition articulates well the indeterminacy of the term in question: *Heimat* is ‘ein Etwas, das uns anzieht und abstößt, festhält und langweilt. [...] Heimat weckt Assoziationen; man versucht sie zu beschreiben, indem man Vergleiche wählt [...] Sie bedarf stets einer zusätzlichen Qualifizierung oder sentenzhaften Charakterisierung.’ (11) *Heimat* is also a particularly German phenomenon, and the word itself carries a resonance peculiar to the German-speaking community; the nearest English equivalent, ‘homeland’, does not contain anything like the same cultural or political weight. Most critics, even as they grasp, like Görner, for an adequate expression of the term, agree on various qualities which combine to make up an adequate description of what *Heimat* might be said, however vaguely, to encompass. In current critical analysis of the term, two aspects in particular seem to be foregrounded as characteristic of a notion of *Heimat*.

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Firstly, *Heimat* presupposes a sense of belonging, a place into which the individual can be absorbed as part of a homogeneity, through her or his familiarity with specific local customs and dialects. *Heimat* is distinct from nation in that it represents a community bound not so much by politically determined structures as by a perceived geographical and cultural specificity. Unlike a national identity, an allegiance to a place of *Heimat* entails an embrace of very regional singularity that is more often than not associated in a literal manner with the land itself. This proximity to the land, of course, facilitated the appropriation of the term into the *Blut und Boden* language of Nazism, and a consequent enlisting of its premises as the basis for an ideological understanding of nation itself. But generally, *Heimat* is indicative of a resistance to the centralising force of nationhood, and characterised by an unwillingness to deny local traditions and laws in the name of a political inclusiveness assumed by the larger geographical space of the nation. In addition, whilst the nation, as fatherland, is semantically closely associated with the male, *Heimat* is also gender specific, implying a female space. Not surprisingly, the qualities that define *Heimat*, notably its promise of security, a safe refuge from the world, and its earthy associations, are culturally perfectly aligned with notions of femininity.

Secondly, and more importantly, *Heimatliteratur* is characterised by a sense of loss, of nostalgia for a place that is no longer attainable, either because the author is in exile,...

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99 Although there is also plenty of evidence to suggest that an urban environment is capable of invoking equally powerful sensations of security and community, and recent scholarship has taken this into account. Iring Fetscher quotes from Walter Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* in support of her contention that *Heimat* is a memory of some place of childhood, regardless of whether that place is rural or urban. Citing her own experience as a child born in Württemberg, growing up in Dresden as the daughter of South Germans, she makes a distinction between a lived and a literary version of *Heimat*, suggesting that *Heimatdichtung* is too often restricted to images of rural landscape, a conceptualisation that does not accord with most actual experiences of childhood recalled: 'Heimat, das ist fur die meisten Menschen realiter die Erlebniswelt ihrer Kindheit. Heimatdichtung knüpft in der Regel an diese Verbindung von Kindheitserlebnis und Ursprungsland an, glaubt aber "wahre Heimat" meist nur in dörflicher Stille und Abgeschiedenheit finden zu können.' Iring Fetscher, 'Heimatliebe – Brauch und Mißbrauch eines Begriffs', in Görner, ed., pp. 15-35 (p. 17).

or because the place has been subject to development, and has lost that ahistorical quality of security which it previously offered. In either case, *Heimat* is, by definition, something recalled, and thus only becomes something concrete in memory: only after losing it do we come to know it. Arguably, then, it is created in imagination, not in reality, and this is what lends it its typical utopian quality as the place of our dreams, which somehow might compensate for the ontological crisis of the self that occurs in the process of growing up, losing our childhood, and so on. Martin Swales suggests that ‘[d]er Kunstwille, aus dem eine solche Tradition hervorgeht, ist ein primär nostalgischer; die Tradition beruht auf einer Sehnsucht nach einer prämodernen, intakten, authentischen Welt, einer Welt, die per definitionem eine agrare, naturverbundene ist, einer Welt, die gegen die Wirren und Komplexitäten der modernen Gesellschaft gefeit ist.’¹⁰¹ This sense of loss is crucial for an appreciation of the characteristic response that *Heimat* evokes, because it is central to the disparity between the utter simplicity of the idea itself and our own vastly more complex experience of mourning for a lost innocence. The notion that *Heimat* is that of ‘der Gegend, in der wir Kind waren’¹⁰² is, in this sense, perhaps the most complete description of the idea, for it encompasses both the sense of a loss of innocence and the longing to retrieve something that, by the very fact of our reflection on it, is out of our reach.

In *Niederungen*, we are confronted with a text that adheres closely to these two characteristics of *Heimatliteratur* outlined above. Its themes are, very broadly, those of childhood, a simple life, proximity to the land and to nature. The world depicted is naive, rather than rational, and one which is resistant to or not yet even showing the signs of progress or modernisation in the form of dynamic change. The circular motion of the seasons is timeless, the village and its people seemingly outside historical linearity. At the same time, the world represented is by definition also lost in

¹⁰² Fetscher in Görner, ed., p. 15.
representation, becoming a memory of childhood rather than the childhood itself: the act of writing stamps the stories with a sense of an authentic, intact world represented but no longer available. The textualisation of familiar people, sights and sounds that go to make up a childhood recalled in language vouches for the loss of childhood, and thus the presence of the text substitutes the actuality of experience of the child. The *Heimat* dream is evoked in scenes that bring us into close contact with the textures of a profoundly familiar landscape, one that is programmed to make 'uns allermal warm ums Herz.'

Of the fifteen stories in *Niederungen*, only four are not set in or around what we may assume to be a small village well known to the narrator figure of each of the other eleven stories. Of these, one, 'Mutter, Vater und der Kleine' (135-7), depicts an unnamed holiday location (identifiable as the Black Sea); the other three, 'Die Straßenkehrer' (138-9), 'Schwarzer Park' (140-1) and 'Arbeitstag' (142) are situated in a bigger, more anonymous town. Whilst we should guard against assuming that the narrator or any of the other characters are the same in each story, they nevertheless display a continuity that contributes to the formation of a coherent whole, the representation of a girl's childhood. The extent to which this is, or can usefully be thought of as, autobiography, will be addressed at a later point: we can, in any case, use the term as a means of giving a loose framework to the collection.

As a memory of a rural childhood set in a tightly guarded and hermetic society, with its own very specific customs, language, mythology, and so on, the conventional *Heimat* structure is thematically and stylistically very much in place. And by the same token, the act of recollection itself attends to the issue of a tightly guarded retention of the narrator's identity as one produced by and in this particular society, and hence articulates a

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103 Fetscher in Görner, ed., p. 15.
104 Müller spent her childhood in a small village called Nitzkydorf, and studied at the Gymnasium and University of Timișoara. For further biographical details, see the brief outline biography in *Herta Müller*, ed. by Brigid Haines (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), pp. 11-13.
concern with origin, with belonging, and with loss: all of these being definitive of *Heimat* and of *Heimatliteratur*.

Yet, within a context that conjures up notions of *Heimat* in the village idyll of this pre-modern agricultural landscape, Müller works to create an altogether less utopian vision of the community and its lifestyle, reinscribing the vocabulary and the images of *Heimat* in a manner that divests them of their purity and naivety. In this sense, Müller is not so much writing against the *Heimat* genre as inhabiting it and questioning it intertextually. She does not reject, but rather appropriates, its language, symbolism, and resonance: its suggestion of safety and belonging, its promise of the simple life, remains fundamentally part of the texture of her own narrative. The text does not only use the notion of *Heimat* referentially, but substantially, that is, it assents wholly to the power and suggestiveness of the term. But it is precisely in this absolute textual vulnerability to a previous discourse where the critical power of the new text resides. The narrative uses the original idea of *Heimat*, already in place in its readers’ imagination, as a framework for mounting a critique of what Müller sees as its illusory premise, and exposing it as ‘ein unauffälliges, weil zugelassenes Mittel der “guten Menschen” zur Verdrängung und Verfälschung’.

The fact that her critique is, from a narrative point of view, almost entirely implicit, says much about the route that the reader is required to take through the text. Like Jelinek, and to a certain extent Grass, in the texts we have considered in the previous chapters, Müller’s narrator eschews the moral high ground, and places the onus on the reader to respond critically to what we might profitably think of as hiatuses in the text, unspoken criticisms which we are asked to voice in response to scenes or events that demand our horror, disgust, outrage, pity, or laughter. But whilst Jelinek uses an ironic, satirical narrative voice, and Grass employs a collective narrator as a foil for an unmitigatingly intellectual and intertextual narrative voice, Müller

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employs other narrative strategies, just as effective, for coaxing her reader into a stance of critical awareness. I would like now to look in rather closer detail at the text itself, and at specific instances of aspects of the *Heimat* concept that I understand to have been critically reinstated as intertext through their defamiliarisation in the narrative process.

One of the insistent motifs of the texts, consistent with the idea of *Heimat*, is the centrality of a particular physical place and the self’s identification with it. In these stories, the narrator’s world is circumscribed by the physical boundaries of the village, beyond which is an unknown, unrecognisable world. Such an incapacity to see further than the end of the village, literally as well as metaphorically, provides the basis for a collective identity among the villagers, a community self that defines itself by virtue of its difference from that which is outside, the ‘other’. The child narrator of the title story ‘Niederungen’ only once leaves the confines of the village, when she accompanies her grandmother to the doctor in town. The experience of the train taking her away from, and inevitably returning her to, the village awakens an awareness in her not only of her own sense of belonging, but also of the circumscription which belonging entails; from then on, she waves at the trains passing by in the distance, knowing that the women she fancies are waving back at her ‘nie absteigen würden in unserem Bahnhof, der zu klein für sie war.’ (77) The hectic imagination of the child allows her to feel ‘daß der Zug mir aus dem Hals herausfährt und es ihn nicht kümmert, daß er mir die Eingeweide zerreißt und ich sterben werde. Er führt seine schönen Frauen in die Stadt, und ich werde hier sterben neben einem Haufen Pferdemist, auf dem die Fliegen brummen.’ (77) The modulation into the present tense here, a pattern repeated throughout the text, creates a narrative mode that is unmediated, resistant to reflection or retrospection. The narrator goes on to picture herself as a ‘schöne Tote’ (78) and imagines the profundity of her mother’s grief: ‘Mutter würde viel weinen, und das ganze Dorf würde sehen, wie gern sie mich gehabt hat.’ (78)
indicative of the discrepancy between what the child can envisage (the point of
reference, even for this grandly eloquent gesture of defiance, remains specifically her
mother and the villagers), and what she feels (the simultaneous existence and denial of a
world outside her own). Whilst the impetus is towards the outside, its movement is kept
in check by the limitations of the imagination; the reality of the self’s world here
supplies its own regulatory function. The death wish, born out of a frustrated impulse
towards autonomy and a desire to be unbound from the place that signifies her static
state of existence, actually reinscribes her connection to it; she imagines her liberation
literally in terms of becoming the earth underneath her:

Ich legte mich ins hohe Gras und ließ mich in die Erde rinnen. Ich wartete, daß die großen
Weiden zu mir über den Fluß kommen, daß sie ihre Zweige in mich schlagen und ihre
Blätter in mich streuen. Ich wartete, daß sie sagen: Du bist der schönste Sumpf der Welt,
wer kommen alle zu dir. (78)

Such a literal connection to the earth is centrally part of the experience of the narrator in
‘Niederungen’. After her failed attempt to die, she walks into the water and feels that
‘das Wasser gehörte zu meinem Bauch.’ (79) Even her own hair ‘tat mir [...] weh, ich
fühlte, wie tief es gewachsen war, in meinen Kopf hinein.’ (65) This sense of
heightened proximity to her surroundings and to her own bodiliness, constantly affirmed
by the narrative perspective, in one sense figures as an assurance of her presence.

But the closeness to nature is also a threat, a symptom of the child’s vulnerability to
the outside world, which is more usually viewed as something encroaching on the child
against her will, rather than at her invitation. The child is constantly subjected to
nightmares of this kind: during a storm, she dreams that the trees ‘traten immer näher an
mein Bett heran’ (47); forced into the light sleep of the afternoon, where the child lies
‘mit meinem Haß im Bett’ (89), she is assailed by the image of swarms of birds with
‘viel Hunger in ihren Schnäbeln. Sie werden mich überfallen und mir die Haut
verpicken, und sie werden schreien, du bist feig und leer’ (90); and drifting between
sleep and wakefulness, her impression of the village, which has ‘erschreckend viele
Bäume’, again cannot keep them at bay: ‘[i]ch habe sie alle in meinem Gesicht.’ (91) The grotesque images of nature that typically inhabit her nightmares are also constitutive of her relationship to nature by day: at one with nature, she is also by the same token terrorised by a sense of its power to absorb her or invade her own bodily boundaries. This conflict is already present at the very beginning of the story:

Die lila Blüten neben den Zäunen, das Ringelgras mit seiner grünen Frucht zwischen den Milchzähnen der Kinder.
Der Großvater, der sagt, vom Ringelgras wird man dumm, das darf man nicht essen. Und du willst doch nicht dumm werden. (17)

The opening sentence introduces the narrative as an undirected and forceless voice in the form of a paratactic statement left hanging, uncontextualised, without a main verb. The child persona is confirmed in its relationship to and dependence on the grandfather, initially as a ‘du’, then indirectly as a ‘mir’ (‘[d]er Käfer, der mir ins Ohr kroch. Großvater schütterte mir Spiritus ins Ohr, damit mir der Käfer nicht in den Kopf kriecht’ (17)), and only finally as ‘ich’ in her defenceless acquiescence to the treatment meted out to her: ‘[i]ch weinte.’ (17) The grandfather’s repeated warnings are internalised by the child, as we see when she claims victory over the bee a few pages further on: ‘[e]s war weit und breit keine Biene zu sehen. / Ich wollte aber, daß eine kommen soll. Und ich werde weiter summen, und ihr zeigen, daß sie mir nicht in den Mund fliegen kann.’ (21-2) But the vulnerability is extreme: later, when she cuts herself, she is mortally afraid of the consequences of the opening of the wound, her anxiety betraying a pathological inability to have faith in her separateness from her

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106 Christian Dawidowski identifies this passage as one signifying the initial movement of the child’s consciousness away from a type of primeval oneness with nature. He suggests that ‘[d]as natürliche Ich (hier als das von der linearen Logik unbeeinflußte Ich des Kindes gedacht) kann nicht als monolithischer und homogener Block unter der Herrschaft des Bewußtseins vorstellig werden; Natur und das Selbst des Kindes stellen eine vorgängige unio dar, die allmählich durch die Restriktionen der Mitwelt in zwei Pole – Subjekt und Objekt – zerfällt.’ Christian Dawidowski, ‘Einheit als Verlust von Ganzheit: zu Herta Mullers Niederungen’, in Der Druck der Erfahrung treibt die Sprache in die Dichtung: Bildlichkeit in Texten Herta Mullers, ed. by Ralph Köhnen (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 13-26 (p. 17). Whilst I broadly go along with his interpretation of this particular moment of the text, I do not see so clearly as he the implied development in the child of what he describes as the ‘linear logic’ of adulthood through the story as a whole. At the end of the story the child seems equally incapable of sustaining a strategic self-defence by this ‘logical’ means of thinking as at the start.
surroundings: 'ich hatte Angst, daß durch diese offenen Knie der Tod in mich hineinfandet, und ich legte rasch die Handflächen auf die Wunden.’ (24)

In the recurring drama of the child's conflict with her physical environment, the comfortable harmony with the land, a pivotal component of our expectations of rural life, is cast in doubt. Disturbingly, it is not only nature that is shown to be wild in tooth and claw, but also the people who live from it. Domesticated animals are maltreated, wild animals are to be feared, and the villagers are engaged in a constant war with nature in their attempts to harness it. Instead of an idealised, organic picture of man in his environment, what we witness in the villagers' behaviour (typified by the grandfather's advice) is a thoroughly utilitarian attitude to nature, mixed with an extreme sense of threat. In this way, the narrative's constant return to the vocabulary and the images of the land both invoke and reject that image of a pre-modern harmony to which we, in this age of post-industrial intensive farming, tend to hark back. The discord, for the reader, is particularly intense because the child's perspective promises already, in our minds, to be the site of a nostalgic, retrospective return to the land.

'Faule Birnen' and the loss of innocence

The village itself, in the majority of the stories, is the focal point, because it is configured not just as the centre point of the child's world but as her one point of reference: it is literally the only place she knows. This familiarity is conveyed particularly intensely in the story 'Faule Birnen', where the child narrator accompanies her father, her aunt and her cousin on a car journey to a different village. The experience of the journey itself, the sojourn in the other village, and the events that take place, are all conveyed in thought patterns expressive of a childish adherence to familiar structures

and routines. The journey begins at the centre of the child's village, the gardens, fences and houses that the car passes giving the comfortable sense of security, belonging, property. (95) The church tower which 'dreht sich' (95) out of the car window here, as in the other stories, represents the centre of the village: besides its importance in the day to day life of its parishioners (for example the early mass described in 'Niederungen' (50-5), and All Saint's Day, the subject of 'Drückender Tango' (104-8)), the church is also the site of all significant events in each villager's life, ending with their actual or symbolic burial in its consecrated ground. Thus it is the principal symbol of belonging and return, both figuratively (for the fallen soldiers whose names are inscribed on the Heldenkreuz) and actually (for the child, whose first glimpse of the village on her return is the church tower (101)). The village as a whole is a fixed reference point throughout the narrative, an environment whose absolute familiarity serves to emphasise the 'otherness' of everything outside of it. Hence, leaving it, she experiences a primary, absolute loss: '[d]as Auto fährt schnell. Das Dorf sinkt ins Blaue. Ich verliere den Kirchturm aus den Augen. [...] / Am Straßenrand ziehen Häuser vorbei. Die Häuser sind keine Dörfer, weil ich hier nicht wohne.' (95) The narrator cannot conceptualise another community in the images that fly past: the houses, in isolation from one another, articulate her own heightened sense of separateness and disorientation. The men she sees 'gehen fremd durch die Straßen' (95), and on the bridges 'flattern die Röcke fremder Frauen.' (95) The children who stand 'allein unter vielen großen Bäumen' (95) eventually blur to nothing, 'bis ich [...] nur noch die großen Bäume seh.' (96) In this context, the comments of the narrator's older cousin, Käthe, are lent a monumental significance: '[j]etzt sind wir schon weit, sagt Käthe und gähnt in die Sonne.' (96) The narrator's sense of place is dependent on comments and explanations like these: Käthe is throughout her only interlocutor, effectively representing a locus of security and authority, and the sole figure to whom the child relates. The motif 'Käthe sagt' runs
hypnotically through the narrative, her comments given further legitimacy in the text with the punctuation that often precedes them. For instance, ‘Käthe sagt: die Alte wohnt oben im Dorf bei ihrer Schwester’ (97); ‘Käthe sagt: es ist der Bach’ (97); ‘Käthe sagt: dort oben ist das Dorf. Ich frag: ist es groß. Käthe sagt: klein und häßlich.’ (99) The narrator is surprised when Käthe does not know the names of birds (96), and, at the end of a conversation about marriage, when she suggests that she will not want to marry, has no reply to the older girl’s logic: ‘[w]enn du groß bist, willst du schon, sagt sie.’ (100)

Hence, when the child is inadvertently witness to her father’s night-time rendezvous with his sister-in-law, the narrative has already foregrounded the inviolable trust that the child places in her cousin as well as her capitulation to the older girl’s seeming omniscience. The fact that Käthe sleeps through the event is central to the child’s sense of personal transgression: the moment is critical not just because it heralds the dawning of sexual knowledge, but because it also represents a shameful secret which the child must keep to herself. Thus it is also a radical loss of innocence, a definitive moment in the modulation from truth to deception, not only in terms of her understanding of her father and her aunt, but also, and perhaps more significantly, in her own capacity for and need of deception. The snake that Käthe tells her about at the beginning of the story (95) and which she remembers as she returns from the village retrospectively comes to bear on the text as the symbol of the loss of sexual innocence. Moreover, the loss of innocence is intimately bound up with the disintegration, for the child, of the myth of the sacrosanct unity of mother and father. The representation of the sexual act itself is characterised by short descriptive sentences, devoid of narrative response, and the present tense contributes (as we have also seen and remarked upon on other occasions in the text) to the sense of unmediated narrative experience:

In this moment, if we sense that violence is being done to the child through looking, it is because of our own emotional competence in filling the spaces between these short sentences: the ‘ich’, grammatically absent from the narrative, is in full retreat. This narratorial ‘absence’ is a point to which I will return in more detail later; but for the time being we should note that in a moment of (presumed) high emotional intensity, the ‘ich’ is entirely out of sight. In the transferral of the verbs onto the objects, the bed, pillow and sheet take on that same sexuality constitutive of the father and the aunt in their passion, and when, on their return to the village the next day, the same verbs are applied to her mother and father, their sexuality is made sordid, automatic, in the echo of the previous night: ‘[h]inter der Zimmerwand ächzt das Bett in kurzen Stößen. Die Mutter stöhnt. Der Vater keucht.’ (102-3) Not until the father has returned to his own bed from the aunt’s does the narrator articulate a response: ‘[d]er Bach lallt zwischen meinen Augen: ich habe Unkeusches getan, ich habe Unkeusches angeschaut, ich habe Unkeusches angehört, ich habe Unkeusches gelesen.’ (98-9) The particular use of the word ‘unkeusch’ is noteworthy, because it is presumably a phrase learnt in school or confirmation classes, and a standard formulation for use in the confessional. There is no recourse to rationality that might empower her to pass judgement on her father’s action, and thereby counteract her own absolute sense of shame. Instead, her response to what she has seen is to draw an imaginary map of the route back to the village on her thigh, an act that symbolises its own inadequacy. Firstly, from the start, the thigh has been associated with sexuality, the aunt’s in particular. The child’s first mention of her is when she sees ‘den Schenkel der Tante dicht neben Vaters Hosenbein’ (95), and when the child sits next to the father in the car after dropping off the aunt and cousin, ‘[d]er Sitz ist noch warm von den Schenkeln der Tante’. (102) And secondly, more urgently, the map itself signifies a return to and identification with a place of familiarity and safety, which has, with the birth of deception, been divested of these qualities. Her most
intimate relationships are now fraught with the secret of her father’s infidelity: the knowledge that she must hide from her father and her aunt, her ‘innocent’ questioning of Käthe about her mother’s status, and the active lie she will be forced to tell her mother regarding the sleeping arrangements have defamiliarised and made hostile a hitherto safe world. On their eventual arrival in the village, the child’s psychological distress is intimated by a physical loss of orientation, in her inability to see the church tower (101-2), and her sense that ‘[d]ie Straße hat keine Richtung. Ich seh das Pflaster nicht.’ (102) And, as she lies in bed, the universal image of the reassuring goodnight kiss bestowed from a nurturing mother figure is first invoked, in the sentence ‘[d]ie Mutter beugt sich zu mir herab und küßt mich auf die Wange’ (102), and then quickly subverted: ‘[i]hre Lippen sind hart wie die Finger.’ (102)

In this brief analysis, I have tried to illustrate the process of defamiliarisation of an intensely familiar world that Müller stages again and again in her narrative. The story is exemplary in its use of the limited narrative perspective of the child to explore the effects of a downward motion of structures of authority exerted on a radically defenceless psyche. But this limitation in the narrative gaze, as I hope I have shown, is not ‘realistic’ in any way: its mediation of the child’s viewpoint is, linguistically and structurally speaking, a highly sophisticated narrative exercise. Within the text, individual words, innocuous at first, gradually become weighted with significance through a process of juxtaposition, in a way that renders unnecessary any explicit narrative stance. ‘Faule Birnen’ is itself an incremental motif in the text. To start with, it is an abstract title seemingly bearing little relationship to the story, but it gathers meaning each time it is used. It is suggestive of the narrator’s extreme awareness of her cousin’s corporeality in the bed next to her: ‘[d]ie heiße Luft aus Käthes Bauch riecht nach faulen Birnen.’ (98) Her father’s return to bed after his sexual liaison with the aunt ‘riecht nach faulen Birnen.’ (98) Catching sight of Käthe’s knickers under her skirt, she
sees a ‘gelben Fleck aus faulen Birnen zwischen ihren Schenkeln.’ (99) In the car, after dropping off the aunt and cousin, the front seat is ‘noch warm von den Schenkeln der Tante und riecht nach faulen Birnen.’ (102) And, finally, ‘[d]ie Ebene ist vollgehängt mit schwarzen Betten und mit faulen Birnen. / Mutters Haut ist schlaff. Die Poren sind leer. Die faulen Birnen kriechen in die Haut zurück.’ (103) By the end of the story, then, the image of putrefying fruit has become a potent symbol for the link between sexuality and death and a vessel for the narrator’s growing (self-)disgust. The associative force of the symbol stands in textually for the narrator’s emotional response, whilst she retains the narrative role of oddly dispassionate observer. Apart from the silent utterance ‘ich habe Unkeusches getan’ (98), which is formulated as an externalised reproach, the text contains neither a rational nor an explicitly emotional response to the experience. The absence of the latter, in particular, forms the key to Müller’s narrative technique in the majority of these stories, and suggests how the reader is drawn into the text to compensate for the narrator’s extreme inarticulateness.

The story is paradigmatic for its invocation of powerful mythical notions of home and identity, safety and trust, concepts that form the basis of the child’s (and no less, the reader’s) emotional world, and the way in which it fails to invest them with substantiality. Thematically, it is an acknowledgement and a critique of the narrow world of the village and a performance of its effects on the child. Stylistically, it retains the child’s perspective as an intensity of experienced moments, held in an expressive mode that is both lyrically charged (supremely self-controlled) and almost punch-drunk (reeling, incapable). The implied older perspective is there too, in the patternings of the rotten pears, in the gaps between the creaking bed and grunting adults. The upshot is a narrative mode held in a kind of quotational, intertextual focus: Heimatliteratur, autobiographical memoir, the tribute to childhood, all these modes are invoked and
questioned. The reader is manoeuvred into a distrust of *Heimat* even as s/he responds to its call.

**The regulation of belief: myth and *Muttersprache***

I turn now to the title story, whose narrator represents the most sustained paradigm of a radical *Unmündigkeit*. How is the child’s impotent (word-less) position set up in relation to an (eloquently) critical narrative voice that is however not allowed to gain distance from the figure of the child? It is my contention that her position in the village is consistent with her position in language, and that language and power, in this sense, have to be understood together as common elements in her oppression. But equally, it is in language where we can detect the potential for resistance, and where ubiquitous power structures can be brought to critical attention.

The collection of stories as a whole is notable for its ‘purity’ of language, by which I mean the almost complete absence both of identifiably foreign words or expressions, and of images or references taken from beyond the confines of the village and its immediate vicinity. The discourse of the text is integrally part of a broader thematic confrontation with issues of identity and belonging. On the one hand, its exclusion of any Romanian words is symptomatic of the absolute lack of cultural or linguistic interchange between the German people and their Romanian surroundings; suggestive of the rigidity with which the German-speaking community has defended itself from unwelcome influence from or integration into its host country. The text represents that preservation of an ‘original’ culture (or its idea), directly reflecting the linguistic – and political – ghetto that is a consequence of the community’s unwillingness to marry out, literally and figuratively (this hermeticism is articulated in the more overtly critical ‘Dorfchronik’, where the narrator remarks that ‘[d]ank der Kerweihfeste kennt sich der Jugend aus dem ganzen Banat, und so kommt es öfter zu zwischendörflichen Ehen, falls
sich die Eltern davon überzeugen lassen, daß die beiden zwar nicht aus demselben Dorf, aber immerhin Deutsche sind' (121)). On the other hand, the text is not part of that genre of self-consciously time/place specific literature that celebrates a particular dialect, often by way of phonetic transcription. The German of Niederungen is non-specific (and in a sense then ageless), and it is perhaps in part this absence of colloquialisms which renders it different and which distinguishes it as 'pure' for its (West) German readership. Certainly, the text gestures, in language, to a highly significant and problematic political purity. By the same token, from a purely linguistic point of view, this so-called purity describes a discourse that is impoverished (in the sense of its culturally enforced isolation) as much as it is rich (in its recourse to the traditional, the epic of a rich literary language), and again, this dialectic brings a particular force to Müller's writing that I am concerned to explore at some length in the following discussion.

The language of the text, then, symptomatically rejects the physical and cultural world beyond the village: there are no place names or names of people since, after all, for the narrator there is only one village, one mother and father, one brush maker, and so on. The text employs language as a representative element of the conditioning of the child: the discourse of the village provides the narrative tools for the child's expression of her world both as a prosaic and a poetic experience. Language thus can be seen to function as one of the principal elements of collective village identity, and must be seen

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108 An in-depth analysis of the issue of language and 'foreignness' is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this study, but it is worth noting that Müller herself draws attention to the different linguistic properties of Romanian as a romance language, and the way that this has profited her own writing. In an interview with Brigid Haines, she comments: '[d]ieses Românisch ist in seiner Sinnlichkeit und in seiner Art, auf die Welt zu blicken, völlig anders, und mir war diese Art, die Welt anzuschauen, immer näher. Die Sprachbilder, die Metaphorik, die Redewendungen, die Folklore haben immer mehr strukturell zu mir gepaßt als das, was in meiner eigenen Sprache vorhanden ist.' Haines, ed., p. 15. Müller's essay 'Und noch erschrickt unser Herz', in the collection Hunger und Seide (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1995), explores the different associations of the two languages in some depth, considering the complex interplay between Muttersprache and Landessprache. For a detailed and qualified analysis of issues relating to Müller's bilingualism see the chapter entitled 'Sprachliche Einflüsse' in Herta Haupt-Cuciu, Eine Poesie der Sinne: Herta Müllers 'Diskurs des Alleinseins' und seine Wurzeln (Paderborn: Igel, 1996), pp. 106-31. See also Grazziella Predoiu, Faszination und Provokation bei Herta Müller (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 183-7.
here as an integral part of the reconstruction of *Heimat*, as discussed above. On the one hand, the words at the child’s disposal, taken from the natural world and received from her elders, suggest the extent to which she is constituted by the village, and the fact that her world too is bounded by its physical boundaries. Born and brought up here, she is part of a heritage that stretches back through her parents, grandparents, and beyond, and by implication will be carried on downwards. The prioritisation of sights and sounds carries a situating, containing force, indicative of her oneness with those people from whom she has acquired language itself. On the other hand, and equally integral to the narrative voice, the text makes systematic use of a highly metaphorical mode, one that however works within the same framework of (substantial) reference, to enter a poetic realm whose potential for imaginative expression gestures at the perceived difference between the child and her environment. This dialectic is crucial for our reading of the child’s ambivalent position, which testifies to an ongoing and irresolvable ontological crisis: the dichotomy between her physical inability to differentiate herself from the village (the world) and her psychological isolation from it.

The absolute subjugation of the child to the governing discourses of the village, to its self-perpetuating mythologies, its gender enforcement, and so on, makes manifest the link between language and power, and thereby provides the site for a critical reappraisal of *Muttersprache* and the normative tendencies of language inheritance and tradition. In this respect, the whole aesthetic of the text, governed as it is to such a great extent by the language of myth, is exemplary. Our understanding of myth as it is configured in this text, as I hope to show in the following discussion, is only in part served by its usual definition as a set of traditional beliefs or stories (approximate to folklore and superstition); it should also be thought of in a Barthesian sense as the naturalisation of signs within a context of particular cultural expectation.109 The resonance of the

customs and beliefs of the villagers, their susceptibility to myth, is part of the text as much as it is part of the means of revealing the extent of the child’s indoctrination. That is to say, the text shows up the function of myth in the village by way of its own systematic discursive patterns. For example, the constant semantic associations of mother and housework (which I shall discuss in detail below) trace the processes by which women are born into a system of language and an unquestioned, because naturalised, role at one and the same time. As such it welds together a negative portrayal of myth, as an insidious, regressive element of *Heimat*, with the entirely positive creative force of the text itself, its imaginative and resonant lifeblood. The text is wholly constituted by its commitment to myth: it makes use not just of specific characters such as *Schneewittchen* (32), but in a more general sense relies on the powerful significations of, for example, the church, witchcraft, the tales of the grandmothers, and so on. The text draws on a culturally established connection between woman and myth, the archetypal feminine traditionally being in tune both with nature and the supernatural. Whilst the village men are beguiled by myth, women are most definitively its primary source and repository. Their power as giver of language and of life itself is accordingly foregrounded. In the particularity of the child persona’s own relationship with her mother, we can contemplate the fragility that this relationship confers on her.

The mother is introduced as she tells her daughter the story of her marriage as a frightened bride. (19-20) Like all the women in the village, her past is recorded in memory and passed down as an oral history, a particular female knowledge. The word ‘damals’, iterated four times in quick succession, makes the recollection into a ‘pre-history’ for the narrator. The mother recounts a time before the narrator’s existence,

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110 Müller discusses the poetic properties of myth at some length in an interview with Wolfgang Müller, where she also sets out her understanding of poetry itself as immanent to the physical world, rather than created in response to it. “Poesie ist ja nichts Angenehmes”: Gespräch mit Herta Müller*, *Monatshefte, 4/89* (1997), 468-76.
when she herself is powerless. The argument with her husband-to-be leads her to say
‘ich wußte damals, daß er mich im Leben oft verprügeln wird’ (20), and she has no way of resisting something that she does not want: ‘[i]ch wollte damals sagen, ich will nicht heiraten, aber ich sah das geschlachtete Rind, und Großvater hätte mich umgebracht.’

(20) In locating herself, the child has to assent to guilt:

Einmal wird [Mutters Hals] doch schon gewesen sein, einmal, bevor es mich gab.
Seitdem es mich gibt, spricht Mutter von meiner Dankbarkeit als Kind und kommt ins Weinen und kratzt sich mit den Fingernägeln der einen Hand an den Fingernägeln der anderen. Ihre Finger sind rissig und hart. (20)

The commentary is one that we must impute: the child is repeating her mother’s grievances verbatim, not counteracting them in any way. Again, the present tense closes the gap between the child persona and her narrating self, reflecting a claustrophobic presence of intensely felt experience. The syntactical repetitions ‘seitdem es mich gibt’ are at one level deadening, as a repeated refrain of the mother’s implied reproach. Yet at the same time the repetition modulates into a kind of litany, an article of faith intoned by the narrating subject, and as such a reassurance of her own existence, even as one defined negatively by the mother’s grievances. The lack of ironic distance (which I shall come back to in more detail later) indicates the complete internalisation of the notion of guilt. There is no space for resistance or an alternative perspective of any sort within the village, because the mother’s behaviour is shown to be well within the bounds of what is expected, indeed normatively demanded, of her among the other men- and womenfolk of the village. Her role, like all the other villagers’, is defined in equal measure by nature and society. The village is dependent on nature for food and water, but engaged in a constant state of war to uphold a precarious division between the civilised realm and the encroaching natural world that threatens to overwhelm it. This battle also supplies the terms for a traditionally gendered division of labour: the men
productively work the fields whilst the women cook and clean at home. The yard functions as boundary and meeting place between these two realms, being the domestic site of the husbandry, suitable for care and slaughter of the farm animals, in which both men and women participate. The women’s work is also the source of their standing in the village, and the state of cleanliness of each house is immensely important for the reputation not just of the woman herself, but of her family as a whole. Throughout the story, the narrator’s mother is shown at work in a ceaseless struggle to keep the dirt at bay and maintain absolute order in the domestic domain. This is the subject of a passage that explicitly links the obsessive nature of her individual endeavours to the normative expectations of the community and, on a more symbolic level, to the rigid structures that characterise the community’s relationship with nature.

At the beginning of the episode (68), the narrator’s mother is shown sewing a wall hanging. The old one is threadbare and ripped from years of dirt and washing in the kitchen, and the narrator’s description of it captures the familiarity of something always present in the most ‘homely’ part of the house, the kitchen. It depicts a woman holding a bowl and spoon and wearing a flower in her hair and stiletto heels, and underneath that, a motto for a happy marriage:

*Lieber Mann, ich rate dir, meide Gasthaus, Wein und Bier. Sei beim Nachtmahl stets zu Haus, lieb dein Weibchen, sonst ist’s aus.* (68)

The doggerel, the old fashioned language, the address to the ‘[I]ieber Mann’, the diminutive ‘Weibchen’, the proverbial advice, and the culminating threat of ‘sonst ist’s aus’, provide a suitably banal accompaniment to the hackneyed representation in the image of the woman as diligent (slaving) cook and pretty (sexualised) wife. In the context of the father’s alcoholism, the motto takes on an ironic force, especially as the narrator has already pre-empted her father’s death from drinking.111 At the end of this

111 ‘Der Arzt kommt viel zu spät. Mein Vater hat seine Leber ausgekotzt. Sie stinkt dort im Eimer wie faule Erde.’ (p. 35) The father in Niederungen, whilst, like the narrator, not the same character in the
episode, too, we are reminded of the motto by the child’s relief at her father coming home sober, her anxiety emphatically set out in the short, breathless sentences: ‘[d]as Gassentor quietscht. Vater kommt herein. Vater ist schon da. Vater kann heute geradegehen, Vater ist nicht betrunken.’ (75) The child’s comfortable familiarity with the wall hangings suggest an uncritical acceptance of the simple values of the idealised rural world they represent. It is left to us, the reader, to respond to the incongruity of the stiletto heels in the kitchen, precisely that to which the child herself responds: ‘[s]ie trug, das gefiel mir sehr gut, Stöckelschuhe.’ (68) And it is also left to us to hear the potential critique in the child’s repetition of her mother’s ‘wisdom’: ‘Mutter sagte, daß Wandtücher sehr schön und außerdem sehr lehrreich sind.’ (68) In the village, education is not socially advantageous; on the contrary, it is highly suspect, especially if flaunted by women. The messages conveyed in the ‘lehrreiche’ wall hangings are representative of the women’s work that precisely militates against women’s learning; indeed, the very act of sewing these cloths is part of women’s collective assent to self-containment in the domestic sphere. Thus the ‘other’ type of education, the propensity to bookishness displayed by one of the village women and her concomitant ‘neglect’ of the household, goes wholly against the notion of what a woman is for, and what defines her. In defying the ‘natural’ law of the village, the woman becomes a scandalous subject of gossip:

Mutter kam aus dem Schuften nicht heraus. Die Dorfleute lobten sie aber nicht für ihren Fleiß. Nur über die Nachbarin redeten sie, daß sie nichts wert sei, daß sie am hellen Tag Bücher lese, daß der ganze Haushalt bei ihr Purzelbaum schlage und daß ihr Mann auch nicht mehr wert sei als sie, weil er das alles dulde. (69)

different stories of the collection, can be seen as part of a father figure qualitatively defined as the same by his violent temper, his Nazi past, and his drinking. The dream sequence which makes up the first prose piece of the collection, entitled ‘Die Grabrede’ (pp. 7-12), thematises the narrator’s confrontation with her father’s Nazi past as he is buried. There are numerous other references to an alcoholic father throughout the collection (e.g. pp. 19, 45, 85-6, 135-6).

Müller addresses the issue of education more rigorously in the later text Herztier (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1996), where the narrator and her student friends are all subject to parental disapproval and suspicion for leaving home and studying. Of course, the narrator’s own act of writing here constitutes a hugely transgressive retrospective rejection of the values espoused by the villagers.
In these words, resonant of garden fence whisperings, we hear the child repeating the gossip verbatim, mimicking and reproducing the women’s prejudice. The words offer no challenge to, but rather complement, the banality of the wall hangings. Yet it is precisely in their unchallenged textual authority that they strike a comical note and that they gain a critical edge. By reinscribing the values espoused by the villagers in so literal a manner, the text makes manifest the processes by which prejudice is handed down and replicated: the child literally lacks an alternative vocabulary. Grammatically, the text offers a demonstration of her position: the subjunctive (‘sei’, ‘lese’, ‘schlage’, etc.) is a quotational device, signifying reportage, reproduction, rather than production.

Such an excessive dedication to housework is, in the child’s imagination, ordinary. The narrator does/can not draw back from this scene or from scenes like it, and she is neither capable of critically reflecting on the petty nature of many of her parents’ activities nor of voicing dissent or occupying an oppositional stance. We have the impression that she consents to what she sees as part of a puzzling world order that nonetheless must at least potentially make sense by virtue of the fact that it is adhered to by the adults, and thus represents the law. Yet the criticism of this world order is powerfully staged through the apparently non-judgemental, observing eyes of the child: her narrating persona is at liberty to focus so closely on what she sees that its monstrous proportions are exposed. The mother’s ‘Fleiß’ (69) is such that she dreams even of washing the sand. In telling the dream, she laughs, ‘aber seine Bilder standen wund auf ihrer Haut.’ (69) The dream, despite herself, is ‘close to the bone’: that is, its sentiment, however ludicrous, is part of her particular housewife reality. The narrator comments that ‘[v]om täglichen Aufwaschen waren im ganzen Haus die Bretter der Fußboden faul geworden’ (69), the mother’s zeal multiplying her workload in the piles of sawdust produced from the woodworm. The narrator does not comment, but simply watches, noting that ‘Mutter kehrte das Holzmehl auf mit einem neuen Besen.’ (69) The satirical
force of the observation emerges through its own internal logic: the mother’s work is never done, not just because of the nature of housework (the dreary predictability of the dirty/clean cycle), but because of the self-producing effect of her own ‘Sauberkeitswahn’.\(^{113}\) The passage as a whole is built up around the theme of the mother’s brushes, which take on metonymic force as a physical manifestation of the mother’s defining role in the domestic sphere. In an extraordinary sequence later in the passage, the narrator lists the different types of brush and their function:


Mutter hält mit ihren Besen das ganze Haus sauber. (73)

The list has a leaden and a sacramental force, similar to that produced in the child’s refrain (discussed above, p. 191), its repetition both mind-numbing and oddly affirmative in the phonetic intonation of the same. Here, though, the installation of this particular belief system also modulates into irony: the particular force in the German of the multiple noun formation (e.g. ‘Brotkrümelbesen’, ‘Teppichklopfbesen’, and especially ‘Möbelabstaubbesen’) lends these substantives a sense of wonderful self-importance, as if they have been made with a rigidly singular use in mind. The fact that it is the mother who strictly delineates their function is something that is withheld from the narrative, and it is left entirely to the reader to infer the caustic implications of the inventory.\(^{114}\)

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\(^{113}\) Friedrich Christian Delius, ‘Jeden Monat einen neuen Besen’, *Der Spiegel*, 30 July 1984, pp. 119-23 (p. 121). Delius’s choice of this citation (see ‘Niederungen’, where the narrator comments that ‘Mutter kaufte sich jeden Monat einen [...] Besen’ (p. 72)) makes clear the centrality of the brush motif as a textual implement in Müller’s attack on ‘ein Deutschum, das allein auf den Sekundärzügen Gehorsam, Ordnung, Sauberkeit, Fleiß, Frömmigkeit und der “Tracht im Gehirn” aufgebaut ist’. (p. 121)

\(^{114}\) This is something that cannot satisfactorily be rendered in translation. The Spanish translation, for example, attempts ‘Brotkrümelbesen’ with ‘una escobita para barrer las migas de pan’, *En tierras bajas*,...
As a controlling, all-powerful force, the mother’s dominance is established by the repeated use of ‘Mutter’. The ‘brush’ sequence, for example, of which the above passage is the central part, consists of ten short paragraphs, eight of which begin with ‘Mutter [...]’. The narrative insistence on the name bespeaks an unequivocal link between mother and daughter, the more because of the correlative absence of the pronoun ‘sie’ and of the possessive, ‘meine’, both of which would denote some distanciation. This inseparability is however, distinct from the traditional perceived/represented unity of the mother/child dyad, because caught within it, the child nonetheless proclaims her difference; the tension between, on the one hand, assenting to the immutable ‘law’ of her mother’s world, and on the other, perceiving it entirely differently, is a constant narrative concern. The tension typically resides in the child’s imaginative faculty, which offers both an escape from the ‘normal’ and a threat to the normative.

The poetic imagination

The issue of a particular, imaginative reality is a preoccupation of the text, and of Müller’s work in general. Her own much-used and much-cited expression, ‘die erfundene Wahrnehmung’, attempts to give outline to it. It defines, on the one hand, the transgressive imagination of the child in the village, and on the other, the

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115 See the altogether more self-reflexive persona of the child narrator in Nathalie Saurraute’s autobiography *Childhood*, trans. by Barbara Wright (London: Camelot, 1984), who interchanges the subjective ‘Mama’ with both the distancing ‘she’ form and the more formal ‘my mother’. For example, when she decides that her doll is more beautiful than her mother, she anticipates, records, and then retrospectively analyses the mother’s response, so that the various positions serve to remind us of the powerful retrospective stance of the recollecting narrator: from the child’s imagined confession “[I]ook, Mama, [...] I think she’s more beautiful than you”, we proceed to the mother’s imagined reply, “[b]ut of course, you big silly, of course, she’s more beautiful than I am”, to her actual response “[b]ut Mama lets go of my hand [...], she looks at me with her displeased expression and says: “A child who loves its mother thinks that no one is more beautiful than she is”, via the adult attempt to understand “[...] what must have irritated her was that [...]” and finally to the child’s own response, recollected thus: “[b]ut that was something I wasn’t capable of discerning [...] [a] child who is like children are, like they should be, loves its Mama.’ (pp. 84-5). The autobiography is written in the style of a dialogue between Saurraute and an interrogative ‘double’, whose sceptical presence is a structural aid to the self-reflective authorial voice.
methodological tools for the author’s representation of a certain, authentic experience contingent on the senses and therefore radically individual. In her essay ‘Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet’, Müller discusses her childhood as something rooted in the experience of the incommensurability of seeing and perceiving, and the anxiety that emerges out of the recognition that ‘[d]as, was wir sehen, überschreitet seine Grenzen.’

She suggests that the origins of this anxiety are less existential than societal: ‘[w]as ich im nachhinein noch genau weiß, ist, daß ich damals nicht vor der erfundenen Wahrnehmung Angst hatte, sondern von der Tatsache, daß man das weiß.’

(13) Quite simply, the child ‘wußte auch, daß es hinter der Norm nichts mehr gab, wodurch man dazugehörte, in einem kleinen Dorf. Und ich wollte dazugehören.’ (13)

Her identification as a ‘normal’ child thus was conditional on being able successfully to subsume the imaginative, individual normality under the deception of an externally imposed, taught ‘normality’. The anxiety that pervades the narrative voice in ‘Niederungen’ and in the collection as a whole has everything to do with this incompatibility between two, equally powerful realities, one external and one internal. And, in a sense, the texts intensify the psychological dialectic of wanting to belong and wanting to escape. The child’s desire is twofold, hence an impossibility.

Let us take an example of this from the title story. In the child’s response to a picture on one of the wall hangings, her perception is shown to be both radically distinct from the prosaic attitude of the mother (who follows the dictates of the Spruch alone), and yet itself, critically, a ‘reality’ not apprehended by the narrative as something invented or devious. The living quality she ascribes to the singing bird is not challenged by the narrative, but presented as indubitable fact. So, she can say, quite literally, that ‘[e]r singt nur, wenn niemand im Zimmer ist’ (74), and he elicits her surprise only by doing

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something she does not expect, when he shuts his beak. By summoning her grandmother to look at the spectacle, she calls attention to her difference, and does not dare to point out the evil twinkle in the bird’s eye, all the remaining evidence of his animate self. The grandmother’s threat, ‘[i]ch reiße dir die Ohren aus dem Kopf’ (74), is only one example of the response the child receives from her elders when she forgets to hide her difference. The child’s knowledge of her environment is intimately related to her sensuous connection with it; hence she can say that ‘[i]ch kenne den Vogel, seitdem ich sehen gelernt habe.’ (74) But at the same time, the knowledge she gains through seeing constitutes an impressionistic, rather than logical, grasp of village life, one that does not assist her in erecting a defence against its brutal mechanisms (although, from a narrative point of view, these mechanisms are publicised, as I shall discuss at more length below).

This impressionistic effect realised in the narrative perspective has much to do with the interplay between precise visual (and sensuous in general) observation and an insistent metaphorical quality in the words used to represent these perceived images. Thus the child’s view of the village, caught in the reflection of the windowpanes just cleaned by the mother, renders the impression on a literal level, whilst at the same time its conceptualisation in language invites our response to how it is configured imaginatively in the child’s eyes:


The village is captured in its entirety in the reflection, which also captures the child’s gaze in the sequence ‘sieht [...] sehen aus [...] sieht aus [...] ansieht’. The narrative performs the process of intense looking in its own intense repetition of the two words ‘Dorf’ and ‘Wasser’, which work in tandem with the verb to construct the sight as a hypnotic magnet to the reader’s own eye in the text. The gaze of the child is not an
objectifying gaze; she is included by implication in the dizzying vision, sealed hermetically within the village and its reflection. The village, metonymically represented by the mother's clean windowpanes (once more reminding us of Delius's 'Sauberkeitswahn'), is all around, mirroring itself, and the image perfectly accords with the narrator's inability to provide a distancing perspective.

Whilst the act of seeing, for the narrator, is not concomitant with gaining understanding or self-definition, indeed often entails a recognition of her own weakness and vulnerability, however the ability to see is emphatically equated with the attainment or possession of power when she applies it to others. This is a repeated association made in respect of the mother, and articulated quite explicitly in the extraordinary line 'Mutter lernt wieder sehen' (74), when, temporarily dazzled by the sun, she hears a nest of cheeping sparrows. The strangeness of the expression collides with the simplicity of the sentence, and taken together with the description, close on its heels, of the sparrow chicks falling to the ground as '[e]s sturzen Schreie in grauer faltiger Haut' (74), brings the text into focus as a constant critical dialogue between the literal and the metaphorical in the voice of the narrator-persona. That is, the sense of fleeting snapshots of unprocessed images and sensations that construct the immediacy of the child's vivid experience also contains a highly sophisticated narrative voice, which betrays a level of consciousness and understanding in all respects at odds with the represented irrational consciousness of the child. It is this sophisticated consciousness that allows the narrative to jump without a breath from the image of the falling sparrows to that of the contented cat that 'schaut gemütlich in die Sonne' (75) without having first 'shown' the interim event, namely the meal itself. And again it is this which permits the expression of the child's horror and fear in terms that are both grotesquely physical and metabolically resonant, in the extraordinary sequence 'Mutter steht mit den Fußsolen über mir. Sie zerquetscht mir das Gesicht. Mutter stellt sich auf meine Augen und
drückt sie ein. Mutter tritt mir die Pupillen ins Weiße der Augen.’ (75) The child’s two eyes are open, unprotected organs, in contrast to the mother’s single one, which is ‘so schmal wie ein Riß.’ (75)

The metaphorical potential of the eye is constantly exploited throughout ‘Niederungen’, and it is a motif running through the collection as a whole.117 I have already suggested that the eye signifies power, or its lack. In the first story, ‘Die Grabrede’, the accusing stares of the mourners are weapons, first loaded (‘[a]lle hatten die Augen auf mich gerichtet. Sie waren leer. Ihre Pupillen stachen unter ihren Lidern’ (10)), then discharged (‘[d]ie Augen stiegen mir durch die Kehle in den Kopf’ (10)). In ‘Der Mann mit der Zundholzschachtel’, similarly, the narrator, faced with the ‘gaffende Menge’, ‘sü[d] ihre durchdringenden Augen in meinem Genick.’ (114) Here, the subsequent refusal of the crowd to meet the narrator’s eye is equally threatening, because it implies her expulsion and isolation from the social group. In ‘Niederungen’, the narrator’s terror of the cow that lifts and throws her turns to rage, and the child ‘wollte ihren großen behaarten Bauch mit den Augen durchbohren’. (24) However, she is powerless against the ‘unerträglich große Augen’ of the same cow, and ‘krieg[t] Gänsehaut von ihrem Blick.’ (25) The primeval power of the eye to establish the order of dominance within and between groups of animals, still in currency in the English expression ‘to outstare somebody’, is a marker for the child, and for our understanding of the hierarchical value system of the village. Similarly, the notion of the single eye is variously employed in the text to indicate a threatening look: the bird on the wall hanging (discussed above, p. 197-8) ‘blinzelte mit einem Auge’ (74), and even more explicitly, the mother ‘blickt seitlich zu mir her’ (75) so that the child can only see one of her eyes. The mythical resonances of the ‘evil eye’ are strong here. But the eye does not just signify relations of power; it is also a much more ‘living’ metaphor in the

117 Müller’s fascination with the literal and metaphorical properties of the eye is evident in ‘Das Auge täuscht im Lidschlag’, in Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel.
The equation between sightlessness and vulnerability, on the one hand, and between sightedness and strength, on the other, is repeatedly made: for example, the kittens tortured by the children have ‘dicke, trübe Augen’ (18), whereas the eyes of the predatory cats waiting for the milk ‘werden starr und klar wie Trauben’ (71), and in the dark ‘tragen [sie] ihre glühenden Augen vor sich her.’ (72) And by extension, sightlessness has something uncanny about it, especially when applied to inanimate objects. In ‘Niederungen’, for example, four out of the five arms of the light are ‘blind’ (21), and in the moonless village at the end of the story ‘das Wasser war blind und geronnen.’ (94) The frost patterns ‘haben das Gesicht milchiger blinder Augen.’ (43) The child’s doll has eyes that are ‘verdorben […]’. Ich sehe hinein, sie sind ein tiefes Loch mit Plastikkugeln drin, die an einer Feder hängen. So sind die schönen blauen Augen meiner Puppe.’ (43) Equally, sightedness, attributed to inanimate objects, is able to disturb us in the same uncanny way. The animism so common in the prose pieces is often expressed in terms of the eye, so that the child, looking out of the car window on the journey in ‘Faule Birnen’, comments that ‘[d]ie Wasserlinsen sind grüne Augen’ (95), and that ‘[d]ie weißen Kilometersteine schauen mich an.’ (96) In ‘Niederungen’, the milk on the stove ‘trieb am Rand eine große trübe Blase, die wie ein Auge mit einem scheelen Blick aussah.’ (70)

The constant interplay between the metaphorical and the literal is perfectly illustrated by the image of the eye, and the innumerable contexts in which it appears. Even when presented at its most literal, the eye cannot be separated out from its status as the

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118 In Max Black’s formulation, some expressions, originally metaphorical, have ceased to be recognisably so through usage and familiarity. In his ‘More about Metaphor’, in Metaphor and Thought, ed. by Andrew Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 19-41, he suggests that ‘a so-called dead metaphor is not a metaphor at all, but merely an expression that no longer has a pregnant metaphorical use.’ He finds such a ‘trite opposition […] between “dead” and “live” metaphors’ unsatisfactory, and prefers to discriminate between ‘a metaphor beyond resuscitation […]; those where the original […] metaphor can be usefully restored […]; and those […] that are, and are perceived to be, actively metaphoric.’ (p. 25) In this sense, the notion of ‘durchdringen’, ‘durchbohren’, etc. when applied to the eye, would be a good example of Black’s second category, what he refers to as a ‘dormant’ metaphor.
expression of necessarily abstract notions of soul, identity, and so on, which accompany it in our collective imagination. Hence the image of the two calf eyes in the ditch, separated from their owner, is created in such grotesquely literal detail that it modulates effortlessly into the surreal:

In der Jauche lagen zwei Augen. In eines biß die Katze mit ihrem Eckzahn. Es knackte, und bläuliche Schlamm spritzte ihr ins Gesicht. Sie schüttelte sich und ging mit steifen gespreizten Beinen davon. (58)

Even when taken out of context, this grotesque image works to produce non-literal associations, not least because the notion of a violence done to the eye has such singular weight in our cultural history (we need think only of Gloucester’s fate in King Lear, and the expression it achieves of the absolute inhumanity of the king’s daughter). In Niederungen, it is clear that the eye is associated primarily with fear, and is the motif that most consistently encapsulates a sense of the hyperactive pathways between mind (emotion, identity) and body (sense organ). And through the sheer force of its presence as a motif in the text, the eye accumulates metaphorical force, even when used in quite literal descriptive mode, as is the case with the above example. Müller, like the Surrealists, recognises the disturbing potential of the dislocation of the eye from its normal place in the face. The close-up focus on the calf eyes, I would suggest, has an effect on the reader not unlike that experienced by the viewer in Buñuel’s filmic representation, in Un chien andalou, of an eye being split by a razor, namely at once repelled and compelled by (literally drawn into the act of watching) the image on the screen. Later in the text the dislocated eye reappears in the description of the drunken brush maker, this time attaining a more abstractly surrealist quality: ‘[ü]berall glitten seine Augen aus. Manchmal schwammen sie ihm über das Gesicht. Sie waren feucht und trüb und kalt.’ (71) The wandering eyes again recall the visual arts, in particular Picasso, whose dislodged eyes provide our own eyes with the unmistakable oblique focus to the broken-up faces he depicts. And, most surreally of all, in ‘Das Fenster’, the
eyes leave the faces altogether; first the mother's: ‘[d]ie stechenden Augen schwimmen aus dem kantigen Gesicht, aus dem schwarzen seidenen Kopftuch, schwimmen ans Ende der offenen Straße, ans Ende des zugeschnürtten Dorfes. Hinter den letzten Gärten, hinter der hohlen Brücke brechen die stechenden Augen die Erde und fallen hinein’ (111); then the narrator's own eyes ‘schwimmen aus dem Fenster, schwimmen aus meinem Kopf, aus meinem heißen Mund, aus meinem versteckten Schweiß. Mein Fenster ist blind. [...] Ich schaue noch einmal durch mein blindes Fenster und sage rasch und leise: mir ist übel.’ (112) Here, the narrative perspective is (literally) disengaged from the physically conceived presence of the narrator-persona, forcing the narrative, along with the reader's gaze, into a unequivocally surreal mode of representation and response.

I have discussed the significance of the eye in these prose pieces in some detail, because it seems to me that the way in which the image is configured and reconfigured in the text provides access to a more general appreciation of the structural and thematic concern with a particular narrative viewpoint that seeks to include the reader in its field of vision. That is to say, the narrator's 'message', if we can call it that, is not something conveyed to the reader in the sense of communicating a radically subjective experience to an external audience. Instead, the communication relies absolutely on the narrative's ability to draw the reader into this world, to restrict his or her viewpoint to that of the claustrophobic perspective of the narrator, and, in effect, to make him or her share in this radical subjectivity. Just as the narrator in 'Das Fenster' cannot see beyond the limits of the 'zugeschnürten Dorfes' (111), so the reader should not be able to take refuge from the unremitting self-reflecting, self-referential movement of the narrative itself. In part, this is achieved by means of the obsessive, insistent prioritising of internal patterns and motifs in the text, of which the eye is only the most obvious example. Theme and

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structure work as one in this respect, because the cyclical pattern of the narrative consolidates the actual images and words used to describe them, which are quite exclusively drawn from within the context of the village itself. The text, linguistically, feeds off itself, relying on internal, incremental patterns that follow a poetic principle of contextuality. And, whilst this technique gives the reader substantial leave to exert his or her own poetic imagination on the text, it also exerts a particular aesthetic that is grounded precisely in the incommensurability of what I have described as ‘pure’, literal and descriptive language (rooted in and making organic reference to a familiar world) and its (deliberately over-)loaded, metaphorical and conceptual use. Language, in this way, is made to straddle two distinct territories, makes us uneasy, and so allows us the critical space to reflect on the proximity of Heimlichkeit to Unheimlichkeit.

The autobiographical subject: memory and the return of the past

Finally, I come to the notion of Heimat as loss, absence, or memory. It seems to me that Müller’s writing has everything to do with a central issue of return to a place, or to an idea of a place, and that, even whilst (as I hope has now been made clear) there is no room in this act of return for a romantic, idyllic voice, nonetheless the narrative cannot expunge from its subject a sense of pilgrimage. In this sense, the narrative persona (the child) and the narrative voice are not self-identical, as one signifies immediate, the other retrospective experience. How do these two modes interact, and what do they have to contribute to a critique (or even to a paradoxical re-establishment) of the notion of Heimat? What I am concerned with, in the following discussion, is the issue of the cohabitation of two temporal modes, the past and the present. As I have tried to indicate throughout my discussion, the text inhabits a generic mode that has centrally to do with a gesture of return: it is autobiographical (autofictional), its subject is childhood, and it relies radically on a folkloric heritage handed down and reiterated by each generation.
As such, its signifying modes represent a consciousness of the past, which is, at all times, in conflict with the immediacy of its childlike central voice. One further aspect of this retrospective consciousness, to which I have not yet attended, is the issue of the father's Nazi past. The father's death, played out or invoked many times in the different pieces, is the centrepiece of a series of references to this past that forcefully historicise a seemingly timeless ruralism. The narrative inscription of this father figure as at once a powerful physical presence and a memory (of his presence and his past) is paradigmatic of the text's agility in inhabiting both these temporal modes. The figure of the father also clearly focuses those processes of memory, reconstruction, and above all confrontation with the past performed by the narrative as a whole. As 'autofiction', an act of authorial inscription, the past is textually definitively in place: yet, as I want to argue now, it never gains status (as we would expect) as distant or even in any way distinct from the overwhelming present into which we are brought. I want first to explore how this effect is created in a close reading of an episode (28-32) that exemplifies this dialectical narrative position, before discussing how this discursive position is used to perform a problematic and complex process of Bewältigung.

The detail at the beginning of the passage, a description of the yard, establishes immediately the primacy of physical perception in the child's world. The narrative does not set up the scene in any way; rather, we seem to stumble upon it, interrupting the child's concentrated inspection of a mouse's nest. Her alertness to the sights, sounds and sensations of the yard is suggested grammatically by the sparseness of verbs and an overwhelming series of adjectives and nouns. Clearly, things, and how they are perceived, visually, orally and tactilely, are at the forefront of the child's consciousness. The child is at the centre of an intensely vibrant, physical world, and this intensity indicates the inability to draw a line between the self and this world. Thus it does not suffice to describe the mice ('[d]ie alten Mäuse sind grau und gepolstert' (28)),
but she must also imagine petting them (‘als wären sie ein Leben lang immer nur
gestreichelt worden’ (28)) and finally even envisage their mousy perspective on the
world (‘[u]nd ihr Kopf ist so klein, als müßten sie aus dieser Schädeldecke alles spitz
sehen, und schmal und flach.’ (28)) The thought is on the one hand comical and
sophisticated in its surreal account of the associated angularity of shape and vision. But
it is also symptomatic of the extent of the child’s empathy with the mice, and of the
extreme disjuncture between her emotional sensitivity and her mother’s utterly practical
approach to the pests in the yard: ‘[s]chau, wieviel Schaden sie anrichten, sagt Mutter.’
(28) When the mother then neatly dispenses with a mouse, the mechanical nature of the
act implicitly violates the child’s emotional field. In the short intact sentence ‘[d]er Hieb
trifft auf den Schädel’ (28), the ‘Schädeldecke’ and the mouse’s imagined vision, so
vividly conjured up in the earlier paragraph, is recalled. The mother’s confidence (‘sie
hat schon einen Maiskolben in der Hand’ (28)), and the brute force of her movements
(‘[d]er Hieb trifft [...]’ (28)) underscore the insubstantiality of the mouse, which is also
fragmented by the narrative voice. It is not named, but consists of nose, eyes, a pale
thread of blood, and of delicate actions (‘schnüffeln’, ‘zucken’, ‘piepsen’ (28)). And
its death is pathetically undramatic, because it had ‘so wenig Leben’. (28)

The narrative voice itself sustains a remarkably neutral tone throughout this ‘drama’.
The sentences, taken individually, are strikingly simple, syntactically and lexically, and
reflect the intellectual level of the developing child. The presence of the child is
signified at the beginning of the passage, but the narrative persona does not enter the
narrative explicitly as an ‘ich’ until after the mouse has been killed. The extremely
subjective account is achieved on the one hand by a stylised reduction of the narrative to
the child’s viewpoint, and on the other by the device of a narrative voice which is
grammatically identical to a third person narrative mode (associated with narrative
omniscience). The child is thus both central to and eclipsed by the narrative mode. The
The primacy of main clauses (characteristic of the text as a whole) forecloses causality or explanation, and has the effect of a radically naïve discourse supported, as so often, by the present tense. Typically, the apparent simplicity is a surface impression, out of which emerges a carefully wrought poetic sensibility. The moment is constructed in language as a sequence of intensely observed, individual images, reminiscent of the visual language of film. The narrative is like a camera eye focused on the mouse and picking up the movement of the cat as it comes into and leaves the field of vision, the steadily held ‘shot’ at the end reflecting the stillness of the decapitated mouse. The activity of the cat is thus recorded in minute and grotesque detail, whilst the child’s response to the moment is conspicuously absent. At the heart of this strikingly brutal depiction, seemingly devoid of emotional energy, the narrative retains an equally striking lyrical force, discomforting in the context. Partly, this lyricism is attained internally through the use of particular words and images with an innate beauty, for example in the delicacy of the cat’s movements as it ‘wälzt’ the mouse, or the sudden modulation of the physical into the metaphysical in the phrase ‘grau und weich wie Schlaf.’ This latter is also a sudden reflective moment about death and the loss of consciousness. Its absolutely human vision implicitly perspectivises the savagery of the act. At such moments as these the reader is urgently called upon to project a response into the scene, that is, to occupy a space incompletely filled by the fragile narrative persona. What is absent in the text itself is present all the more insistently around the
text: namely, the imaginative capacity of the reader, the same capacity that distinguishes
the child from her mother. The reader’s empathetic investment (with the child rather
than the mouse) is thus the means by which the child’s horror is instated into the text.
The resonance of the narrative comes as much from between the lines as in them. Thus
when the child finally appears as an ‘ich’ persona in the text, her desperation is a
physical sensation already anticipated and appreciated in the strictly neutral lines that
precede:

Ich nehme die Kolben von unten. Ich baue einen Gang für die Flucht der Mäuse. Ich habe
dabei einen dicken Knoten Angst in der Kehle stecken, einen dicken Knoten Atem. (29)

In the doubling of ‘Angst’/‘Atem’, the reflective voice is to be heard again, the physical,
adrenalin-filled sensation expressed as metaphor and as a human act of cognition.

The act of ‘reading between the lines’ is something which Müller herself identifies as
constitutive of the reading process. In her essay ‘Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet’,
Müller comments that ‘[d]as, was fällt und aufschlägt oder kein Geräusch macht, das
was man nicht aufschreibt, spürt man in dem, was man aufschreibt. Das Gesagte muß
behutsam sein, mit dem, was nicht gesagt wird.’ (Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel, 19) From
this authorial viewpoint she goes on to analyse herself in the role of reader: ‘[d]as, was
mich einkreist, seine Wege geht, beim Lesen, ist das, was zwischen den Sätzen fällt und
aufschlägt, oder kein Geräusch macht. Es ist das Ausgelassene.’ (19) With regard to
the moment analysed in some detail above, we can, I think, apply this observation
perfectly to the text. The physicality of the text (in the sense both of its textuality, the
words on the page, and of its subject matter, the body of the mouse, the bodily
sensations of the narrator, including her anxiety, which is ‘einen dicken Knoten’ (29) in
her throat) contains within it (between its lines) the definitively non-physical
continuation of the text, that which has been ‘left out’. Hence, the narrative is sustained

120 With this in mind, Müller’s response to Brigid Haines’ question (Haines, ed., p. 18) as to whether the
reader is a ‘Mitgestalter des Textes’ is somewhat surprising, and perhaps a little disingenuous. She
claims: ‘[I]ch mache mir über den Leser gar keine Gedanken!’
at the level of a sharply defined interplay of the tangible and the intangible, the real and the imagined, the image itself and its associations, the represented text and the signified ‘extratext’. This interplay, in which the reader is of course implicated as an active force, plays a critical part in the construction of the narrative persona of the child.

The hectic intimacy accorded the prose in the use of the present tense here enacts the child’s psychological condition, highly sensitive, pathologically anxious and intensely real in its close-up perspective on the tangible world. At the same time, though, her perception is intensely, privately subjective: she does not record what she sees but responds to it, and it is this imaginative response that is mediated to the reader. The narrative is in this sense also conspicuously artificial in its – metaphorical – reconstruction of that intensity of experience, even as it follows those paths of the child’s essentially unstructured thought. In this passage, the sight of the mice prompts a memory of another occasion, and just as a child does not indicate the jumps of her/his mind to an interlocutor, so too here the change of time and subject is effected with no warning:

Der Kater beiht zwei Köpfe ab. Seine Zähne knirschen.
Es ist Oktober, und es ist Kirchweih im Oktober.
Der Nachbarjunge schoß für mich an einer Schießbude. (29)

The central, radical break in the episode, with its shift in tense and absolute thematic incongruity with the preceding event, is a narrative rupture coterminous with the child’s undisciplined imagination. Its matter-of-fact tone conflicts with our desire to establish it as something abstract, illogical, or dream-like. Only when the child chooses a clockwork mouse as a prize is the retrospective link with the live mice in the farmyard established, and the child’s recalled delight in the new toy is then inevitably invested with the disturbing elements of the earlier scene. I would suggest that the intersplicing of the memory of the fairground into the narrative at this point is paradigmatic of the associative method on which the narrative relies generally. As a stylised imitation of the
child’s inability to construct reasoned links or bridges between the individual things that she comes into contact with and the recollections that they prompt, the text withholds the tools for our own reinstatement of logical progression into the narrative. The associative mode by which the ‘story’ proceeds from section to section and within the sections themselves is part of an aesthetic dis-order deliberately invoked to stage the child’s lack of overview. Thus the random jumps are both symptomatic of an unstructured imagination and evidence of a carefully wrought narrative denotation of the same. That artificiality is, of course, most notably present within the sentences themselves, in the virtuosic command of a language that is both childishly literal and supremely metaphorical in nature. We see this at the end of the passage, when the child is lying in bed listening to the sounds of the pig being slaughtered:

Ich hörte das Schwein. Es stöhnte.
Sein Widerstand war so klein, daß die Ketten überflüssig waren.
Ich lag im Bett. Ich fühlte das Messer an meiner Kehle.
Es tat mir weh, der Schnitt ging immer tiefer, mein Fleisch wurde heiß, es begann zu kochen in meinem Hals.
Der Schnitt wurde weit größer als ich, er wuchs übers ganze Bett, er brannte unter der Decke, er stöhnte sich ins Zimmer. (31)

The transferral of the knife from the pig’s to the child’s throat turns something unseen (and therefore imagined by the child) but real into something physically palpable (in effect real for the child) but imaginary. The ritualistic slaughter, itself resonant as an iconic cross-cultural, cross-temporal image in our imagination, gains metaphorical significance as it is appropriated by the child as a vividly perceived expression of her own absolute defencelessness. The combination of extreme physical sensations (‘[e]s tat […] in meinem Hals’) with surreally distorted, dream-like configurations (‘[d]er Schnitt…ins Zimmer’) in these consecutive paratactic sequences belies the apparent simplicity of the prose and, indeed, of the childlike perspective itself. Likewise, the uncanny transferral of the sound of the groan from the dying pig to the cut itself has a metonymic force that anticipates the unsettlingly beautiful lyricism underlying the
grotesquery of the description of the envisioned entrails and the slaughtered pig itself. In
the final image of the sequence, the spattered blood of the pig on the snow, the Snow
White legend is invoked and subverted, its central metaphor (‘Schneewittchen hatte
Haut so weiß wie Schnee und Wangen so rot wie Blut’ (32)) turned back into reality. As
punctuation to an episode representing the absolute defencelessness of the child, the
positioning of the Snow White legend (suggestive of both a romanticised desire for
escape and a – female – quality of radical vulnerability and dependence) is
characteristic of that sophisticated and tightly disciplined patterning process qualifying
the text throughout. This structural control keeps the child’s necessarily restricted
viewpoint intact and constant, whilst simultaneously ensuring the narrative equilibrium
required for its critical (we could say adult) contextualisation.

The absolute poetic integration of these two modes of what I have called immediate
and retrospective experience, which I have traced through one particular passage, plays
a fundamental role throughout the stories in giving expression to their central, unifying
theme, that of return. This return is narrated principally as a return to (representation of)
the condition of childhood, yet it is also a return to a specific period of history. In the
first lines of Niederungen, in ‘Die Grabrede’, we see an image of a train station, a young
man leaving for the front, his wife and small child watching him from the platform. It is
a televised image: as it is switched off, the narrative modulates into what only gradually
reveals itself to be a dream about the father’s burial, where his wartime atrocities are
recounted to the daughter by accusing figures at the graveside. In this introductory
piece, Müller definitively writes herself into a very specific narrative position, as a child
of the Au schwitz generation attempting to come to terms with her parents’ past. Within
the Heimat framework, and its sense of eternal presence, the depiction of the violent,
drunken ex-Nazi father is a constant memory of a time both before and outside the
hermetic village. In ‘Niederungen’, we see the father unable to forget the camaraderie of
wartime: drunkenly reliving those times with his Nazi songs ('Drei Kameraden, die zogen ins Leben hinaus' (85)), 'Vater hat das Gesicht, hat die Augen, hat den Mund, Vater hat die Ohren voll mit seinem eigenen rauhen Lied.' (85) These songs, as a specific intertext, signify both an intensely personal confrontation with the father and a more general critical confrontation with a generation unable or unwilling to answer questions about or take responsibility for the recent German past. Yet, as we have seen, in the title story the child's own capacity for criticism is limited: the songs themselves call him to account for his past, whilst the child's anger and fear is restricted to his overwhelming presence. And the text itself reminds us of his guilt: on the stove is a pot of turnips, bringing to mind the image in 'Die Grabrede', when the father is said to have raped a Russian woman, and 'ihr eine Rübe zwischen die Beine gesteckt' (9), and anticipating the child's vision of the mother in 'Niederungen', 'nackt und erfrönt in Rußland liegen, mit zerschundenen Beinen und mit grünen Lippen von den Futterrüben.' (93) The absence of retrospective or adult evaluation of these nightmarish images, especially in the context of an entirely uncritical village discourse where those returning dead or alive from war are heroes, forcefully demands us to supply the missing critical perspective and reflect on the relationship between the inarticulate child and the articulate installation of the past, specifically the father's past.

The father is a pivotal figure, insofar as he represents most tangibly the narrative slippage between the (lived) present and the (written/recollected) past. The stories, particularly 'Niederungen', attest to an autobiographical authorial voice at odds with herself in a constant struggle to gain distance from, and a critical perspective on, her own position in the village. Conventionally, the retrospective gaze, left unchallenged, can be thought of as an assurance for the reader of the narrator's physical and emotional survival of whatever events or traumas are being related in the text, especially when, as here, the reader is aware of their status as autobiography, or 'autofiction', as Müller
herself describes her writing. Ruth Klüger's account of a Jewish childhood, for example, is physical evidence, from the title *weiter leben* onwards, of her own continuing existence.\textsuperscript{121} In Müller's text, by contrast, we are denied this retrospective security: any notion of an 'after' is undermined by the use of a present tense that constantly and unschematically interrupts the past tense. In one episode, for example, the narrative time, begun in the past tense (‘Mutter nähte ein Wandtuch’, 68), changes no less than nine times before its conclusion in a present that points towards the future in the child's desperate resolution '[i]ch greife Vater nie mehr ins Gesicht. Das ist sein Tod.' (76) The fact is notable not just because it illustrates the grammatical instability that this constant movement between past and present achieves, but also because of the surprising lack of rhythmic disturbance that the back and forth motion actually causes as we read. We might assume that the text would be disrupted by this instability, causing us to stop and take notice of what is, after all, a highly stylised narrative discontinuity. But the mechanism is strangely inconspicuous, perhaps because the text is in any case fragmented by the narrative breaks that signify a change of scene. In terms of our own (lack of conscious) perception of the insecure temporal mode, it seems clear that the narrator's retrospective position does not in any way attest to a successful overcoming of the pathological anxiety characteristic of her persona's lived present/presence. Above all, there is a complete absence of discursive retrospection in the narrative voice, that is, no retrospectively imposed understanding evinced *out of* the condition represented by the text.

Yet the act of writing itself nevertheless represents a site of resistance to the oppressive structures enclosing the narrator. The stories clearly create an autobiographically recognisable narrative persona, however fictionalised and imagined.

\textsuperscript{121} Ruth Klüger, *weiter leben*. (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1992). The author, on the very first page, sets down 'wie ich jetzt bin, ein ungeduldiger, zerfahrener Mensch, eine, die leicht was fallen läßt, [...] nirgendwo lange tätig ist und oft auszieht, aus Städten und Wohnungen, und die Gründe erst erfindet, wenn sie schon am Einpacken ist.' (p. 9)
This narrator figure, as I have tried to show, is unable to escape the closed world of the village, and the narrative perspective, moreover, implicates the reader in the child’s experience of powerlessness. The representation of this experience in Müller’s text conflicts with what we expect from autobiography, which is a sovereign overview and resolution of a past. The parallels between the author and the narrator would imply, on one level, a rehabilitation of the writing self in recollection, whereby the textual fixing of memory (even in a fictionalised mode, as this is) ensures some sort of domestication of that memory. However, consistently, Müller’s revisit of a traumatic childhood achieves the opposite effect: her narrator’s re-entrance into the past is so total that instead of confirming the present as a ontological assurance of self, it rather dissolves that present into the past, making the speaking subject coterminous with her history, and unable sovereignly to review it. Textually, as we have seen, there is no assurance of distance, only an ongoing desire for it, which implicates the reader in a permanent process of collapse under the dual effect of a fragile narrative persona and an overbearing textual immediacy. Instead of the closure of autobiography allowed by the motion of looking back, the narrative voice strategically occupies an autobiographically recognisable persona wrenched from the past as a means of disrupting the process of Bewältigung. This is the point at which the narrative persona most clearly diverges from the authorial presence behind it. Müller, considering the role of memory in ‘Wie Wahrnehmung sich erfindet’, can say that ‘[i]ch kann heute “Angst” sagen. Und ich kann “Freude” sagen. Es trifft nicht mehr zu. Ichrede darüber. Ichlebe nicht mehr darin. Ichrekonstruiere, auchwenn ich innerlich nachvollziehe.’ (Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel, 10)

The stories in Niederungen stand as a fictional inscription of a profound failure to come to terms with the past, both with the individual trauma itself and with the social conditions shown to be responsible. But the failure, as I hope I have also made clear, is a psychological failure, and as such restricted to the narrator as persona: whereas on
another level the prose itself, as a supremely controlled lyrical mode, is the index of knowingness, and as such, must surely be an expression of overcoming and even of liberation.

In conclusion then, we can reassess the role that the central notion of *Heimat* plays, and how it is made the focus of an angry, polemical critique in this text. The intersection of themes that call to mind the warmth of a familiar place of childhood, lost, but longed for, with a language and a narrative position that radically subverts these same themes, leads us to a radical reconsideration of the term. Müller makes no concessions to a readership that harbours nostalgia either for a lost rural idyll or a lost childhood innocence. Both, under the microscopic interrogation to which the prose subjects them, are reconceived as a pernicious deceit. What is most remarkable in this text is that a narrative that entraps us so thoroughly in its vision, and forces us to bear such close, vertiginous witness to the effects of power that oppress the narrator, does not also at the same time make us feel that we have been bludgeoned into consenting to an angrily articulated sense of right and wrong. Müller's installation of an unyielding, absolute moral position runs the risk of profoundly alienating her readership, but does not. The text's overwhelmingly positive reception (outside the community that it depicts) might in part have to do with the fact that it commits to a generally recognised view of individual freedom, and depicts the abuse of power that infringes the individual's (and particularly the child's) right to it. But, notwithstanding this critical accord, the methodology alone, the extreme manipulation of the reader into consenting to the authorial view, must surely at least in theory point towards an internal conflict in a text that takes issue with authority and writes committedly against the 'Auge der Macht'. *(Der Teufel sitzt im Spiegel, 20)* The fact that, to my mind, the text still manages to preserve a substantial poetic space for the reader within such an unremittingly angry
text is not only a mark of its aesthetic achievement, but of course, also the key to its convincing critical voice.
2. Intertextual inhabitations of the 'foreign': *Reisende auf einem Bein*

In an interview with Walter Vogl, Müller discusses the embryonic *Reisende auf einem Bein* in the following terms: '[i]ch habe das Buch nicht fertiggeschrieben, aber ich weiß jetzt, was mit der Person geschieht – nämlich gar nichts.' Müller seems to suggest with these words that Irene’s condition is primarily one of paralysis, of an essential immobility that stands in contrast and as a challenge to the wealth of metaphors to do with movement with which the text is furnished. Irene is a traveller, arriving in a West German city (Berlin, although never named) from a dictatorship (presumably Romania), and until the end identifies with the rootlessness and insecurity of other travellers. Müller, in the same interview, describes her thus: ‘Irene wünscht sich zuletzt, mit einem Zug weit wegzureisen, zusammen mit Leuten im Abteil, die nichts von sich preisgeben, die [...] an den großen Bahnhöfen immer ein bißchen unsicher zwischen den Wartenden stehen und dann in die Städte verschwinden. [...] Und sie stellt sich dann vor, daß diese Personen zwischen U-Bahn-Schächten, Kinos, flatternden Plakaten und Straßenlärm nicht mehr wissen, ob sie in dieser Stadt “Besucher mit dünnen Schuhen” oder “Bewohner mit Händgepäck” sind.’ (6) That same Irene who at the end of the text desires to remain a traveller, surrounded by anonymous generic figures in generic cities, is however also engaged in a search for connections to people and places. Indeed, our impression of her depends formally on the connections that she forms with three men, relationships that, as Müller says in the same interview, provide the conversational bases and thereby serve as conductors of the themes of the text. Müller draws attention to the loneliness of the central figure, in whom a desire for anonymity is married complexly to a desire to situate herself vis-à-vis others, not just Franz, Stefan and Thomas, but countless other characters with whom she forms relationships of a

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peculiarly intense nature. The text, I would contend, bears out this condition of twofold
desire in its concern with oppositional modes of fluidity/paralysis, location/dislocation,
and nearness/distance, which are drawn together into the figure of Irene.

Critics have responded very differently to the work, divided in particular in their
response to Irene. Günter Franzen, for example, thinks of Irene as a combination of
‘garstige[s] Kind und [...] übelwollende Frau’, whose ‘kindliche Wut über den Verlust
eines imaginierten ursprünglichen Glücks’ is also a witchlike ‘böse[r] Blick’ passing
malevolent judgement on the new world. Verena Auffermann sees Irene as a more
passive creature, emphasising the fragility of the ‘Flüchtling’ and her response to the
unfamiliar by placing herself, in writing, in the position of the native: ‘[s]ie hört uns
beim Reden zu. “Ums Verrecken” sagen wir, oder “Das ist’n Ei.”’ Sibylle Cramer’s
(less favourable) review makes much of the ‘doppelten Ich’ which she sees as ‘eine[...]
Spaltung in eine alte und eine neue Identität.’ Margaret Littler has given a suggestive
comparative reading of Müller and Libuše Moníková, concentrating on their relative
representations of subjectivity. Littler finds that, whereas Moníková’s idea of
subjectivity ‘lays claim to an identity based on nation state and cultural revivalism, [...] network
Müller constructs [...] a ‘city nomad’ [...] in whom chaotic urban diversity is intrinsic
to her subjectivity, rather than being that against which she defines herself.’ (40)
Littler’s understanding of Irene’s subjectivity has proved influential in my own reading,
yet I am less convinced by her wholly positive account of the effect of this ‘chaotic
urban diversity’ on Irene. To my mind, the text relies on our response to an altogether
more ambivalent central figure, who in the end does not – and indeed cannot – reconcile

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123 Günter Franzen, ‘Test the West. Herta Müllers Prosa Reisende auf einem Bein’, Die Zeit, 10 November
1989, p. 5.
124 Verena Auffermann, ‘Gefahr, ins Leere zu stürzen. Westdeutschland, gesehen mit den Umsiedleraugen
Herta Müllers’, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 10 October 1989, p. 5.
126 Margaret Littler, ‘Beyond Alienation: The City in the Novels of Herta Müller and Libuše Moníková’,
in Haines, ed., pp. 36-56.
her desires with her experience. Her arrival in Berlin does, as Littler emphasises, precipitate not so much a search for a new identity as a liberation from it as a fixed, stable category. However, contingent on this, as Müller herself points out, is an acceptance of the condition of loneliness and isolation that has to do with a psychological as well as a physical homelessness. In this respect, Irene's experience is one of loss as much as liberation, and the dissolution of identity is thus neither unproblematic nor complete.

In particular, the question of name and image (those constructs of the fictional external world of other people and Irene's own perception of herself in photographs) and how these relate to that Irene constructed in the narrative voice is paramount, because it suggests an estrangement from an idea of self, which in turn hints at a desire for wholeness and self-identification. Karin Bauer has used Reisende auf einem Bein to demonstrate what she perceives to be a systematic attempt in Müller's writing to overcome taboos operative under the Romanian state mechanism, central to which is that of self-reflexion. She suggests that in writing against these taboos, Müller reinscribes them in the portrayal of Irene: '[z]war meldet sich hier Widerstand an gegen die Übermacht des Bestehenden und den Zwang zur Konformität, aber die Verbote, Zwänge und Traumata eines Bewußtseins, das sich unter repressiven Bedingungen herausgebildet hat, haben sich als blinde Flecken in den Text eingeschrieben'. I find Bauer's comments and analysis persuasive: however, I shall suggest that it is precisely in these 'blinde Flecken' where complex issues of identity (and identification) are brought most to our attention. In this respect, too, the reader's own response should be seen to play an important part in the representation of the crisis of subjectivity and the complex desires that accompany it. S/he inevitably enters the narrative with the desire to substantiate her or his own picture of the protagonist – a desire, I want to argue, that is

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systematically thwarted by the absence of reliable signposts in the text. For whilst Irene is obsessively the focus of the narrative (the extraordinary recurrence of her name is itself evidence of this), we experience her as someone altogether elusive and inaccessible. My interest lies primarily in this ‘prohibitive’ force of the narrative voice in respect of Irene, for I would assert that it acts as the main focus to the text’s thematic concern with the idea of the (unknowable) stranger and the narrative challenge of occupying this position. This, I will argue, is the Irene complemented by and articulated in Müller’s central intertext, Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*.

The quotation from *Invisible Cities* calls attention to itself as a comment on, and in certain respects a code for reading, the new text. But it is not a means of enlightenment: with it, we are not endowed with tools for interpreting or understanding the text, but rather shown a way of negotiating the complications of the narrative into which it is grafted. The Irene of *Invisible Cities* functions as a starting point, indeed as the point of orientation of a text that programmatically circles around questions of identity (more specifically appellation and categorisation) and, relative to this, ownership and belonging. The Irene of *Reisende auf einem Bein* is a self whose identity is defined and legitimised by others, but at the same time the narrative form initiates its own interrogation of this process of naming, and places Irene beyond its reach. It is my concern, in the following analysis, to trace Müller’s use of the Calvino intertext in particular and her dedication to an intertextual mode in general, and to ask what it contributes to our appreciation of and response to that condition of the (literal and metaphorical) foreigner that Müller seeks to represent. Irene’s discursive situation is complex: on the one hand, she is swamped, threatened both by her environment and the linguistic and cultural codes that supply it with meaning; on the other hand, she is aloof, critical and potentially subversive. That marriage of extreme vulnerability and empowerment is at the heart of the text, and provides the all-important context for the
Calvino intertext. This intertext is complexly housed within a narrative system that demonstrates Irene’s ambivalent status through its obsessive confrontation with issues of language and communication. I propose to begin with an account of the narrative strategies deployed in setting up this ambivalence in Irene; this, I hope, will facilitate a more complete understanding of the intertextual dimension lent by the anterior text.

**Irene’s position in language**

We are never given any idea of Irene’s appearance, apart from an insubstantial sketch of a woman in her mid thirties. She remains a shadowy figure, out of sight in a text that is preoccupied with the visual, the quotidian observations that construct a detailed close-up impression of the city, one that for this reason is not a sovereign overview of it. The use of the third person narrative form (which Müller, in the interview with Vogl, purports to have chosen as a way of gaining a perspective that might rupture the autobiographical subject positions of her earlier texts) initially suggests a distancing, objectifying gaze, but we quickly realize that the narrator is not a sovereign presence in the text distinct from Irene. Rather, the use of a consistent mode of erlebte Rede, making the whole text into a projection of Irene’s diffuse thoughts and experiences, in fact has everything to do with a rejection of this sovereign narrative voice. At the same time, the strangely elusive, elliptical narrative position that she occupies is discomforting because, although it focuses obsessively on her thoughts, it neither provides analysis of nor insight into them. That is, the narrative is at once highly subjective and situated (because wholly restricted to Irene’s perspective) and at the same time unreceptive to readerly identification, in that it seems to relish its own narrative obscurity, its resistance to being ‘decoded’. If we attempt to analyse the central character and her relationships, we do not proceed much beyond Stefan’s
summary account of the events that the text covers, and it seems right that there is in
fact so little to be said:

Eine Frau am Meer lernt einen Studenten kennen. Der Student hat eine Schwester. Die ist
vor Jahren die Freundin eines Soziologen gewesen, den sie manchmal trifft. Eines Tages
ruft sie an und schickt ihn im Namen ihres Bruders zum Flughafen. Sie sagt: die Frau
vom Meer kommt an.

[...] So lernt der Soziologe die Frau vom Meer kennen. Stefan lachte:
Und wie das so geht, der Soziologe kennt einen Buchhändler, der sich im Spätsommer
von einem Schauspieler trennt. Der Student und die Frau vom Meer, das ist so wie seltene
Nähe und häufige Ferne. Und der Buchhändler ist einsam. Und die Frau vom Meer ist
fremd. Und der Soziologe ist oft verreist. Und wie das so geht, da läuft der Buchhändler
dem Soziologen den Rang ab.
Irene schwieg.128 (150)

The simple syntax here, the short sentences, the repetition of 'und', the unsophisticated
structures ('das ist so wie [...]'; 'wie das so geht'), indicate the text's accessibility, yet
the narrative as a whole is elliptical and unenlightening, reflecting our experience of
Irene as at once vertiginously close and out of reach. The description of Irene as 'die
Frau vom Meer' brings to mind Ibsen's The Lady from the Sea.129 Like Ibsen's Ellida,
who is caught between a need for emotional and social stability and a longing to flee
these constraints and exercise her free will, Irene bears within her a duel impulse
towards intimacy and distance. Common to both is a quality of mystery: they are
outsiders, out of place in a new environment. Ellida's restlessness and claustrophobia is
reflected in Irene's constant desire for movement, and both at the same time are fearful
of the thought of the freedom they so urgently crave. However, whilst Ellida,
symbolically released by her husband, finally manages to 'acclimatise' to her situation
and reconcile her inner needs, Irene's condition promises to remain precarious, even if
an acceptance of this state indicates some sort of hesitant resolution. Her status as a
German speaker adrift from her native Romania is reflected as a textually felt alienation
not however accompanied by any sense of clarity. Yet rather than pathologise the

128 Herta Müller, Reisende auf einem Bein (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1995), p. 150. All subsequent
page references are to this edition.
129 Henrik Ibsen, A Doll's House; The Wild Duck; The Lady from the Sea, trans. by R. F. Sharp and E.
condition of the foreigner embodied in the figure of Irene, the narrative uses it as a way of entering into a more abstract textual debate with those issues of communication and understanding that confront Irene as she attempts to come to terms with her alien environment.

Central to this debate, in this text, is the relationship between images and their significations, a relationship that serves to unite individuals into temporary or permanent communities of shared response. Communication relies on common codes of interpretation of those things that make up the space around and between us: physical things we see, including human gestures and signals, and things we hear, including speech sounds. The more our response diverges from the so-called norm, the more isolated we become. Irene’s isolation is founded in a fundamental inability to read the codes of the city successfully, at least if we understand successful negotiation of these codes to constitute adapting to a west European mentality. On one level, certainly, Irene’s confused responses do have their roots in a cultural gap between the country she has left behind and the one to which she has come, as is made manifestly clear in the following exchange with Thomas:

In dem anderen Land, sagte Irene, hab ich verstanden, was die Menschen so kaputtmacht. Die Gründe lagen auf der Hand. Es hat sehr weh getan, täglich die Gründe zu sehen.


[...] Wenn du mich anschaust, siehst du auch Gründe. Gründe und Folgen. Ich sehe nichts. (130)

Irene is in a new country whose language, although native to her, is nonetheless different, not least because it is part of a more general social code to which she does not yet have access. In different ways, each of her relationships testifies to her failure to make communicative links across a cultural divide.

However, this codification of experience is not simply explicable in national or cultural terms, but is also very much symptomatic of a divisiveness between individuals,
by virtue of the fact of their perceiving at all. We see this at work in Irene's relationships with each of the three men, but most particularly with Franz. The emotional space between them, usually a physical one symbolically portrayed by the postcards Irene sends him from Berlin, is retained and heightened when they are in physical proximity to one another. The distance is now, as then, one created (and by the same token revealed) by language and by text, and as such unbridgeable. As they walk along the street, Irene is struck by the image of the leaves covering the parked cars, commenting that they look like graves. (85) Initially, Franz does not respond, but later, in the hotel, he returns to the subject: '[s]eltsam, sagte Franz, daß du, wenn du Blätter siehst, an Gräber denkst.' (85) To his assertion that the cars look 'geschmückt', Irene responds, '[d]as eine ist mein Bild, das andere ist dein Bild [...]. Dazwischen gibt es nichts.' (86) The different significations prompted by the image in their respective imagination symptomatically address the status that communication has in the absence of common interpretative strategies for decoding the world around. Müller's concept of 'die erfundene Wahrnehmung' (discussed above, pp. 196-7) is perfectly illustrated by this sequence: the imagination, as well as confounding the security of a knowable, reliable exterior world, by the same token undermines the security suggested by community, because it underwrites the difference between perceiving individuals rather than their sameness. The narrative follows Irene's gaze out of the window as she talks, and the interspersed images of various movements on the street further dislocates an already disjointed dialogue. The sparseness of the descriptions of what Irene sees, a drunk, a woman getting out of a parked car, require the reader to supply individual associations to these images, the gaps in the text making the experience of reading into

130 On this point, I disagree with Antje Harnisch, whose reading leads her to conclude that 'die Entfremdung nicht existentiell zu lesen ist, sondern sich deutlich auf einen konkreten Kontext bezieht, nämlich den der rumänischdeutschen Aussiedlerin in Deutschland.' Antje Harnisch, "Ausländerin im Ausland": Herta Müllers Reisende auf einem Bein', Monatshefte, 4/89 (1997), 507-20 (p. 512).
something radically private: this is the very opposite of a persuasive narrative perspective.

The difficulties that Irene confronts in her attempts to communicate with Franz are not especially related to their difference as man and woman, but rather part of a more wholesale sense of inadequacy that engulfs her in her search to find words that approximate (let alone capture) experiences: ‘[w]enn Irene jetzt hätte sagen müssen, was sie empfand, wäre kein einziger Satz richtig gewesen. Nicht einmal Silben, die willkürlich zusammenfanden’ (89), she thinks at one point, amid a confusion of sights and sounds at the train station. Irene is constantly brought up short by her self-conscious relationship to language, and here the relationship between meaning and sound is disrupted altogether in the breakdown of expression from sentence to word to syllable. Interestingly, her words imply that syllables put together at random might somehow facilitate a more approximate rendition of the feeling than a whole sentence. Above all, though, they demonstrate a radical insecurity with language, a lack of control or volition that is repeated at other moments in the text, both spoken and written. This is particularly the case when Irene is writing postcards to Franz: ‘[b]ein Schreiben der Karten fielen Irene Sätze ein, die sie gar nicht im Kopf trug. Die sie nicht auf der Zunge hatte, wenn es um sie und die Straßen ging.’ (62) And later, ‘[w]as Irene auf die Rückseite der Karten schreiben würde, bestimmte sich von selbst.’ (143) The sentences have a disconcerting autonomy such that the speaker is possessed by them and creatively rendered obsolete. Thoughts themselves, unspoken sentences, are equally untrustworthy: watching the caretaker speaking, when she arrives to take up residence in the flat assigned to her by the authorities, Irene considers that ‘wenn er was sagte, dachte er nicht an die Sätze aus seinem Mund. [...] Dann kamen Gedanken in Irenes Kopf und gingen. Und keiner hatte was mit ihr zu tun.’ (38) The text again and again points to the structure of the sentence as something fraught, involuntarily articulated
and/or liable to misinterpretation, and not as a self-contained vehicle of meaning. Individual words are microscopically examined and so defamiliarised: ‘Zauderer, sagte Irene, ein seltenes Wort’ (39); ‘Irene sagte das Wort Mauersegler’ (122); ‘[d]er Junge wiederholte das Wort: Faschist.’ (153) Equally, the relationship of words to one another and to their context is made self-conscious: ‘[v]or dem Briefkasten war Irene verwirrt. Unter dem Schlitz stand: Andere Richtungen’ (46); ‘Den Zusammenhang, in dem die Wörter “Festessen” und “Begrüßungsansprache” im letzten Absatz standen, verstand Irene nicht.’ (157)

The breakdown of the straightforward association between words and meaning that occurs is closely aligned with Irene’s impotence in the new city. Yet at the same time, precisely that insistence on the word’s fraught, ambivalent or even duplicitous quality is what provides imaginative and critical space within the context of what is said, heard, and narrated during the course of the text. The recognition of discourse as an unstable category is a way of articulating the essentially flawed nature of communication, and of loosening the normative demands it places upon us. Irene occupies a dialectical position in this respect. In a sense she is empowered, by being critically alert to the unreliability of communication, but by the same token she is dis-empowered, by being directly implicated in its practical effects. Her fascinated distress at the slipperiness of words is fundamentally part of the narrative exploration of this dialectic and its effect on fictional characters. This dialectic is held in focus throughout by the fact that whilst the text, in its hotchpotch sentence formation, plays in a rather more sophisticated manner with those issues of language that Irene confronts, it nevertheless remains fundamentally anchored within a recognisable reality sympathetic to the need to extract meaning on some level. Neither Irene nor we, it appears, can escape that reflex desire to make intelligible whatever we are brought into contact with, and the narrative exploits this desire. A good example is the episode in a park when Irene is addressed by a man who
ill asks her: 'hast du nicht den Elektriker gesehen.' (110) Irene commandeers the sentence, just as it is, and 'passes it on' to another unsuspecting man who walks past her. In the absence of discernable meaning, discourse still functions blindly and sets up bridges between individuals. Both Irene and the second man respond 'appropriately', she with a shake of the head (110), he with a '[n]icht, daß ich wüßte.' (111) As reader, we could impose interpretations on the episode, most obviously that the first man is a madman, and that Irene takes on his persona to see the effect it has on others. And in the text as a whole we could read Irene’s story as a laboured path through an unfamiliar city and a defamiliarised language.

But the text does not just reflect Irene’s highly self-conscious approach to the texts, if we may call them that, of the city: it also produces her as a precise textual performance of what she experiences. The unsettling combination of remarkably simple linguistic structures and a recognisable plot on the one hand, and the disconnected, juddering path from one sentence to another, the unyielding semantic field of the text, on the other, refutes our readerly expectations. The highly stylised effect that this produces is potentially, and on occasion actually, irritating, partly since in any case it is difficult to sustain such a tension over an extended work, but also because the text sometimes seems to be sacrificing its natural lyrical force (which is, as ever, at the centre of Müller’s prose) on the altar of a stylistic idea. Yet it is largely by means of this technique whereby words and sentences do, for us too, come to be rethought as individual, physical objects, laboriously produced in the mouth and spat out more often than not at random. The mouth, the tongue, and the lips as physical organs are common points of focus in the text, seen to be literally producing the words that issue forth, which in turn are physical manifestations as much as sounds. When Irene meets Stefan at the airport, for example, she tries to repeat one of his sentences, but ‘[e]s war verschwunden. Das Bewegen der Lippen störte das Gehör.’ (25) When an official
interviews Irene, ‘[d]as Wort Weile stand noch in seinem Gesicht wie der Schatten unter
seinem Kinn’ (51) and later, when he opens his mouth, ‘[e]r sagte nichts. Seine Zunge
stand im Mund, als hätte sie kein Platz gehabt.’ (52) At another point, an old shopkeeper
‘öffnete den Mund, als wollte sie gähnen. Sie gähnte nicht. Es war ihre Art, die Wörter
to ordnen im Mund, bevor sie sprach.’ (76) In its preoccupation with the physicality of
words and the labour of passing these words from person to person, the text makes
manifest its own awareness of the fragility with which discourse is held in a
comprehensible relationship to itself. Heightened sensitivity to this discourse quickly
unravels the hitherto assumed distinction between intelligibility and nonsense. That
latent sense of the absurd in language, where a sequence of letters or a certain sound
suddenly and inexplicably strikes one as odd, runs much nearer to the surface in a prose
that, although superficially simple, resists our attempts to ply it for meaning.

Textualisations of the cityscape

Berlin is two things at once in this text. On one level it is a physical entity, supplied
with all the dimensions and activity of a metropolis, the bustling streets, the endless,
nameless figures who people them, the shops and shopping centres through which Irene
passes, the U-Bahn, the billboards, and so on, all this supplies the text with a certain
authenticity born of familiarity. On another level, these visual prompts to our memory
of the city are denaturalised, becoming an exercise in language and thought. At all
times, the experience of the city, rather than the city itself, is in focus. The central effect
of this, in reading, is that whilst we are assailed by the concrete presence of Berlin, we
are always also abstracted from it in metaphor. The narrative processes of imagination,
together with the absence of a stable vantage point within the text, mean that the city is
peculiarly invisible to us as we read. This slippage between the literal and the
metaphorical is central to the articulation of Irene’s ambivalent relationship with her
environment, and, more complexly, to the reader's appreciation of her narrative position: she is, as well as a fictional character in confrontation with a new environment, a fully textualised metaphorical representation of that experience. I would like to turn now to a passage that to my mind exemplifies Irene's negotiation of the city in the terms that I have outlined. My analysis should provide a basis for the subsequent discussion of the Calvino intertext, where I shall consider how the metaphor of 'Irene', the city/woman created with the intertext of *Invisible Cities*, is brought together into a productive relationship with the physical world of Irene and the city, the narrative basis of the new text.

The passage, a prelude to Franz's recollection of the text from *Invisible Cities*, depicts their goodbye at the station and Irene's return to the hotel where they have been staying, and directly precedes what we assume to be a telephone conversation and the subsequent letter from Franz where he identifies the Calvino citation. The opening line, 'Irene begleitete Franz zum Bahnhof' (89), anticipates a certain mise-en-scène, ushering us towards a narrative which is, in effect, already in place as a visual set of images (so beloved in the film medium) of lovers parting on a station platform. However, the narrative does not fulfill our expectations, directing our attention away from, not towards, the lovers. In particular, Franz is all but eclipsed from the narrative, which is disconcerting not least because the perspective is unmistakably Irene's, with its trademark parataxis and ellipsis. The indiscriminate documentation of what Irene sees, its determined absence of order, lends a verisimilitude to the narrative that lies in the way that the very randomness of the path of the roving eye is reproduced. The images we are given stand alone in the narrative, in that they are not embedded in a textual commentary that would make them into a set of markers of something else, namely, Irene's psychological state and the main event on the platform, the lovers' goodbye. Like film without commentary, which permits us to invest heavily in the illusion of
unmediated images, the images here constitute a description, rather than an analysis, of
the scene and of Irene's part in it, and in this sense we are at liberty to interpret or
imagine what we like from what we see. There is no discernible order or logic to the
narrative, and if we require one, we must impose it on the text ourselves. However, the
concentration on image does always set up a very specific framework: it dictates not
only what is shown to the audience, but how and for how long, so that the retention of
the illusion of immediacy and naivety (in that 'accidental' quality of the ranging camera
'catching sight' of things) entails an artful manipulation of the audience's forgetfulness
of the art form, or of their willingness to submit to its conventions. In prose, the effect is
disconcerting, especially in the narrative mode of this text, where in spite of the third
person mode we are provided neither with a substantial perspective on Irene, nor, in
spite of the predominance of erlebte Rede, a foothold in her subjectivity. In any case, it
is difficult to find an appropriate relationship to a fictional character that is at once
immediately subject to, assailed and often threatened by, her surroundings and radically
disengaged from them in her role as observer.

The scene on the platform is rendered impressionistically, as a collage rather than a
description:

Auf den Schienen stehende Züge. Senfgrün waren die Strümpfe. Blau der Rucksack des
Die Augen offen und groß und starr, als streiften sie nie ein Bild. (89)

The sentences, lacking for the most part a main verb, have no grammatical direction. As
so often, the prose unsettles: does it indicate a helplessness, a stunned inertia or,
conversely, does it suggest a high degree of intensity, a liberation from the exigencies of
prose, almost a type of prose-poetry? The main subject of these lines is slipped into the
narrative indirectly as colours and attachments (the tights, the rucksack) before the
surprising definite article 'des Mädchens', which implies that the girl is already familiar
to us. But there is no sense of bodily wholeness: like the scene itself, the girl is really
just a collage of differentiated bits and pieces, of legs, rucksack, headphones, eyelids, eyes. Similarly, the two women in conversation, initially configured intact, are systematically dismantled, until their hands and lips seem to be acting autonomously:


And the narrative confirms its proximity to the surreal with the introduction of a pair of shoes, ownerless, that mirrors 'nichts als ein Paar weißer Socken.' (89) This total disintegration of the body is consistent with a thematically well-established tendency to narrate individuals not as whole entities but as summations of parts and gestures. For example, the man who masturbates in front of Irene on the beach, before she has received her papers to cross into Germany, is a sketchy figure, made up of penis, dripping fingernails, broken mouth, and old, soft face. (8) When she walks the streets of the city, she sees body parts: initially envious of the women for the financial means which permits them to keep abreast of the latest fashion, she observes them walking:

'[m]it leicht verrutschten Nähn gingen Frauenstrümpfe den Rinnstein entlang, auf Straßenenden zu, als hätten die Frauen nur Beine. Beine für Männer. Beine mit Schlingen.' (75) After seeing three women with the same hairclip, she is shocked at the homogeneity that fashion promotes. And she is horrified at the thought that female desire, too, is homogenous, that women in cotton underwear 'die Schlucht genauso kannten, wie jene anderen Frauen, die sich in schwarzen Spitzen in den Atem zwischen Männerhände legten.' (76) When she examines the underwear, her fingers 'gingen unaufhaltsame eigene Wege. [...] Dann stand zwischen den Höschen, zwischen den Fingern an Irenes Hand der Daumen von Franz.' (76-7)\(^1\) Franz's thumb is

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\(^1\) Karl Schulte identifies this moment as one of the 'surreale Einsprengsel' in the text, and compares it to an early Buñuel film. His essay explores the text as a 'literarische Collage, die zuweilen eine Tendenz zur experimentellen Poesie aufweist. Als Ganzes gleicht die Erzählung einem Mobile, an dem Fetzen der Wirklichkeit hängen, die sich ständig bewegen und doch auf der Stelle beiben.' Karl Schulte, 'Reisende auf einem Bein. Ein Mobile', in Köhnen, ed., pp. 53-62 (pp. 53-4).
metonymically suggestive of Irene’s desire, but is also part of that grotesque disintegration of ‘things’ symptomatic of her experience of the city. By comparison, her first sexual encounter with him is an altogether more all-encompassing experience: ‘[i]hre Blick bohrte sich nach innen Gänge durch den ganzen Körper. Sie spürte Franz, seine Knochen, als gehörte sie zu ihr. / Der Körper war heiß und fand die richtigen Worte. Der ganze Körper dachte mit, dachte nach, wenn Irene was sagte.’ (14) Later, Franz himself becomes a ‘thing’, ‘[d]enn mit den Menschen kann man umgehen. Und Irene konnte mit Franz nicht umgehen.’ (141) However, throughout the narrative, Irene reveals a tendency to think in pieces, hence her difficulties with all relationships, not just that with Franz: ‘[i]n der Fußgängerzone wimmelte es vor Köpfen, und Taschen und Schuhen’ (161), is her impression of the crowd at one point. Earlier, in the highly stylised episode in the bar with an immigrant Italian, she says that she ‘versuch[t] manchmal an einen Menschen zu denken, und schaff[t] es nicht.’ (61) In the light of her tendency to think in fragments, and for someone for whom ‘das Detail größer [ist] als das Ganze’ (162), this is not surprising.

The equation of animate and inanimate, in the scene at the station as in the rest of the text, is indicative of Irene’s approach to the world. Textually, it creates a world rendered surreal, because all the hallmarks of the human are brought into question. On the station platform, the lips of the women are given life of their own, and later, ‘[a]us der Kugel, die sich drehte, sagte eine Frauenstimme Züge an. / Schöne Lippen, hoch oben, dachte Irene, sagen den Zug an für Zwergen.’ (90) The disembodied, talking lips unnerve us in the same way as when Irene’s eyes make an equivalence between the girl’s legs and her rucksack, comparing their weight as if they can be conceived of in the same physical terms. (90) Moreover, our experience of what Irene sees is equally truncated: with all the emphasis on sight and on the senses in general, we are nonetheless faced with a text characterised by remarkable visual gaps, not least, as I have already pointed out, in the
image of Irene herself. The scene on the platform, as a collage of elements whose proximity to one another simply provides an affirmation of their disparateness, represents the same paradox that Irene finds in the actual collage she has made earlier: ‘[die Verbindungen, die sich einstellten, waren Gegensätze. Sie machten aus allen Photos ein einziges fremdes Gebilde.’ (47) Irene’s difficulty with self-expression is conceptually parallel with the manner in which she conceives of physical things, namely as singular entities which strung together should, but do not, make sense. Language itself, she notes, is in reality as arbitrary as the events that it describes. But surely there is a certain affirmation in recognising this? Just as in collage, which even as it presupposes a freedom from structure and logic depends on a sensibility to the possibilities of association between the most random elements of the imagination, so too in Irene’s life, the heightened role of coincidence in the face of her acknowledgement of the essential dis-order of events and their expression could actually be seen as a re-appropriation of the notion of arbitrariness as a way of coming to terms with a set of circumstances too complex to negotiate from a position of perceived control. This is not so much a fatalist approach as one that puts its faith in the ‘gegensätzliche Verbindungen’ of the collage as a principle of living. Thus we can think of Irene’s trajectory through the narrative as insecure and out of step, but in a positive sense. Firstly, it allows her to sidestep categorisation, so that in her relations with the authorities and with friends she is not receptive to the identities they try to impose on her. Her status as ‘nicht heimatlos. Nur im Ausland’ (61) is politically and personally exasperating for others, far more so than for her herself, as we see in the long-winded bureaucratic process of fitting her into the existing rubric, and in Thomas’s response, bordering on the aggressive, to her straddling of the two languages she has been brought up with. (97, 103) Secondly, it leaves in her a space to play with, and subvert, those formulaic processes of the ‘organised’ city structure and its ‘cityspeak’ that others are
wholly immersed in: over-sensitised to the advertising jargon of the west, she replays its jingles in her mind until their utter banality is exposed. She is likewise mistrustful of Stefan’s tendency to fill gaps in his language with innumerable colloquialisms (115-6), and of Franz’s hollow clichés, like his parting words on the platform here (‘[e]s war schön mit dir’ (90)), and at the end of the telephone conversation in which they discuss Calvino (‘[i]ch wünsch dir was’ (93)). Phrases like this, which we take so much for granted, are dissected and found wanting; in their place, however, Irene struggles to find a more substantial discourse, and it is doubtful whether the silence to which she resorts is actually empowering, even though, as I have discussed above, it certainly facilitates a critical distance from language and its functions. The theoretical advantages of taking up non-participatory positions vis-à-vis a dominant discourse are tempered by the threat of a diminishing practical and political efficacy that comes of a perceived and self-perceived marginalisation.

On her return to the hotel room, Irene watches a news bulletin about a series of rapes that have been committed in a small village. The skeletal television report is rendered universal in the text by its typical components: the time, the ‘Dämmerstunden der Abenden’, the scenario, ‘die jungen Frauen’ going ‘vom Bahnhof durch den Weinberg nach Hause’ and ‘[d]ie Täter: zwei Männer.’ (90) The weapon is held up for the audience to consider, a reward offered, and an artist’s impression of the perpetrators flashed up on screen. There is nothing to distinguish this from any other rape scenario: all this is a quite elemental scene in the modern collective imagination. Yet, again, Irene departs from the ‘normal’ response: ‘[s]elbst wenn Irene die Täter gekannt hätte, wäre es für sie wegen des Kopflohs unmöglich gewesen, den Opfern gerecht zu werden. / Was Irene mehr schmerzte als die Tat, war das Vertrauen in den Weinberg. Das war für die Täter und für die Opfer maslos gewesen.’ (90-1) I feel that moments such as these expose the fine line the narrative treads in using Irene as at once a subjectively situated
Ich with human preoccupations (notably her relationships) and a theoretical instance of subjectivity unbound. Her outsider status is what allows her to be critical, but it also runs the risk, on occasion, of placing her on a privileged moral footing, from where she appears not to need to shoulder the same human responsibilities of the ‘crowd’ in the city. That characteristic uncertainty of narrative perspective, usually at once intensely subjective and clinically aloof, is more contrived than achieved in her response to the news bulletin here. Müller does not always reconcile the tension between theory and practice in her central figure that her construction demands, rather oscillating between them, with the result that Irene can occasionally seem either mired in self-preoccupation or unsustainably aloof from her own story.

In the final part of the episode, though, the balance is again achieved in the form of a narrative extemporisation on a piece of graffiti that Irene spots as she leans out of the hotel window. The act of looking out of a window is symptomatic of Irene’s relationship with her surroundings. Inside, she is enclosed, oppressed, and not ‘at home’ (whether in the hotel, the Asylantenheim where she is placed at first, or the rented room she is assigned, for which she buys a guest bed). Outside, she is free, but rootless and disorientated: she does not own space, and cannot displace it, seeming not to assert a physical presence on the street. The graffiti is a textual expression of Irene’s own desire. Written in upper case, it is a literal inscription of Fremdheit that confirms a sense of distance even as it appeals to its reader to collapse it:

KALTES LAND KALTE HERZEN RUF DOCH MAL AN JENS. Und eine Telefonnummer.

The grand appellation to a collective (German) people makes the familiarity of the ‘ruf doch mal’ incongruous, and the telephone number, on the one hand an actual and symbolic link to the author, is also over-familiar and obscene. Again, the text borders on
cliché here, capturing graffiti’s tendency to inhabit simultaneously the banal and the profound, to embrace both the pornographic and the political. The inconsequentiality of the scribbled plea high over the heads of the passers-by is also what lends it its magical force in Irene’s eyes, imagining those walking underneath feeling the chill of someone’s unfulfilled desire. Irene’s response to the words is a literal enactment of the text’s concern with the interpretation of signs: visual (the things she sees, including letters) and aural (sounds of the city, and most importantly, words). The written text, never self-explanatory, is here turned into a puzzle to be decoded. Indicative of this is the awkward physicality of the words for her as she phones the number: ‘KALT und LAND und HERZEN. Die Telefonnummer hatte Irene vergessen. Und JENS. / Es läutete kurz. Dann sprach eine Kinderstimme. / JENS, sagte Irene.’ (91) Jens, in upper case, represents an idea and promises a connection, both of which are confounded by the sound of the child’s voice on the other end of the line.

I have attempted, in my discussion of the episode above, to explore the relationship Irene has with her immediate environment, because it seems to me that an understanding of this brings the text as a whole into focus as a project to articulate a certain alienated quality of modern living, a critical disconnection that is borne of a loss of immediate meaning. The episode I have discussed is a graphic representation of Irene’s attempts to orientate herself using those signs available to her as a prop, and an illustration of the incommensurability of individual desire and imagination with its object. As Irene notes, ‘[d]ie Überschwenglichkeit der Wünsche und die Kargheit der äußeren Dinge hatten sich überlagert.’ (142) The literal figure of the ‘Reisende’, which Irene represents at the beginning of the text, increasingly takes on metaphorical force as the result of a duality of loss and desire concomitant with that knowledge of one’s own non-belonging: ‘Reisende mit dem erregten Blick auf die schlafenden Städte. Auf Wünsche, die nicht mehr gültig sind. Hinter den Bewohnern her. Reisende auf einem
That which characterises the ‘Bewohner’ is the unwitting ease with which they read the signs of the city and know how to respond to them. They do not have Irene’s ‘Blick auf die [...] Städte’, but an altogether unreflective relationship to it, in that they know ‘sehr genau, was sie an jedem Ort tun sollten’ because they carry ‘die Stadt, in der sie lebten, auf dem Rücken’. (138-9) The ‘Reisende’ is incapacitated by that same freedom which allows for reflection, and paradoxically, it is in the act of becoming aware of the codes of the city where their meaning becomes elusive. The constant interplay between nearness and distance comes, over the course of the narrative, to represent Irene’s state of dis-location. Irene’s coming to terms with her condition is contingent on accepting the absence of a stable vantage point, either in or outside the discourses of the city. The intertextual weight of the *Invisible Cities* might, as I want to go on to argue, ensure a positive conceptualisation of this absence in reading, even as it further confounds our desire to stabilise the text and Irene in it.

*Invisible Cities: the intertextual dimension of city/woman*

Franz is the one who brings Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* into play, and who also draws attention to the fact that he is quoting from another text: ‘[w]ir haben bewiesen, daß wir, wenn es uns gäbe, nicht wären’ (92), he says, and immediately after, ‘[d]er Satz ist ein Zitat’. (92) Irene has not recognised the citation, nor does she seem to know the text from which it is taken. Franz is unable to tell her the source: to her inquiry, he replies ‘[i]ch weiß nicht [...]. Auch den Titel des Buches habe ich vergessen. Ich weiß auch nicht mehr, worum es ging. Nicht um Liebe.’ (92) In any case, the citation paves the way for Irene’s explication of her own ‘use’ of individual sentences from literature. Her words here are consistent with the way that she has already quoted from two other authors, the first Cesare Pavese, the second unidentified. From each of these she takes a
sentence, and in each case the narrative suggests that the sentence is absorbed into and contributes to a programme for living. In the first case the citation, which is also the text's epigraph, is 'ein Satz, den sie jahrelang mit sich herumgetragen und verwandelt hatte: Aber ich war nicht mehr jung.' (24) Later, in Irene's dream sequence, it is 'die Jahre, nichts als die Jahre' (154) that have eroded her childish understanding of the world. I would suggest also that the invocation of Pavese's glamorous but ageing woman in Among Women Only focuses the intimations of mortality that accompany Irene's new beginning in Berlin, and thus relativises the somehow privileged metaphorical position that is created for her beyond time and its effects (whereby Franz, in his fixed gestures, is already old (125)): Irene feels 'sich alt, nicht zu alt. Ich bin mir nicht zu alt' (60), but when Thomas compares her to an apple that will wrinkle as it grows old, 'Irene erschrak.' (102) In the second case, the citation is something that she has re-used textually, literally reinscribing it onto a road sign on which 'stand ein Mann mit einer Grabschaufel. Irene hatte auf das Schild geschrieben: Graben ist immer am Rande der Legalität. Es war ein Satz aus einem Buch. / Auch diesen Satz hatte Irene auf ihr Leben bezogen.' (84)

To Franz she says that after one has forgotten whole books 'nur einzelne, waghalsige Sätze bleiben übrig. Sie gehören einem, als hätte ein eigenes Erlebnis in einem Bahnhof sie einem zugeflüstert. Als wären sie einem, ohne daß man das wollte, eingefallen.' (92-3) Certain sentences ambush the reader involuntarily, and only once s/he is possessed of them can s/he begin to subject them to her or his own mental schema:

Man verändert diese Sätze, man macht sie so, wie man selber ist, sagte Irene. Man glaubt, man kann von diesen Sätzen leben, weil sie waghalsig sind.
[...]
For Irene, the repetition of a sentence plucked from somebody else’s text familiarises it and eventually domesticates it to the extent that the new ‘user’ comes to own it entirely. This is the point at which it loses its power to shock, its ‘Waghalsigkeit’. That quality that separated it from its original text and allowed it to be noticed is what makes it exceptional under those circumstances. The ‘other’ voice (of the original author) fades over time and is eventually lost, absorbed into the self’s, and in so being is qualitatively transformed into unexceptional, ‘gewöhnlichen’ discourse. But by the same token, only very specific sentences, those that have some affinity with the reader, are retained; an initial connection is at play that will enable memory to function:

Irene versuchte, den ersten Satz, den Franz gesagt hatte, zu wiederholen. Sie hatte ihn vergessen:
Wenn es uns gäbe. Und was stand davor, und was stand danach. Er war ein Satz, der Irene nicht gehört. Den sie sich nicht gemerkt hätte aus einem Buch. (93)

In the same way that the image of the leaves on the car, discussed above (p. 224), points to the imaginative chasm between two individuals faced with the same visual prompt, the reading mind is radically individual, subject to different responses and different focuses during the reading process. What one may take away from a text, another may pass over completely. Irene, unresponsive to the Calvino citation itself, ironically reiterates precisely what Marco Polo proposes to the Kublai Khan regarding the interpretation of texts, namely that each text is a different one, depending on the reader. *Invisible Cities* is an extraordinary collage of descriptions of different cities that Marco Polo brings back to the emperor Kublai Khan, but the listener is, as Marco Polo reminds him, informing the tales at every step with his own responsive interpretation:

*Kublai asks Marco, ‘When you return to the West, will you repeat to your people the same tales you tell me?’*

‘I speak and speak,’ Marco says, ‘but the listener retains only the words he is expecting. [...] It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear.’

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Throughout, the role of the Khan in interpreting Marco Polo’s descriptions is foregrounded. Initially, their communication is not even based on language, for ‘[n]ewly arrived and totally ignorant of the Levantine languages, Marco Polo could express himself only with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder and of horror, animal barkings or hootings, or with objects he took from his knapsack [... ] which he arranged in front of him like chessmen’ (20), and even when language has been acquired, in its preciseness it lacks imaginative force, so that ‘little by little, he went back to relying on gestures, grimaces, glances.’ (32) That the Khan’s imagination constructs different cities out of those which Marco ‘brings’ to him is, early on in their communication, indicative of the Khan’s anxiety in attaining fixed notions of his empire and a consequent assurance of his domination. Marco continues with his descriptions but ‘Kublai interrupted him: ‘From now on I shall describe the cities and you shall tell me if they exist and are as I have conceived them.’ (36) But this is not the point, and he is gradually instructed into an appreciation of the imagination. The dream, not the reality, takes precedence, as he begins to comprehend when he says, without rancour, to his envoy: ‘I do not know when you have had time to visit all the countries you describe to me. It seems to me you have never moved from this garden.’ (82)

Franz’s sudden recollection that the text he is quoting from is about cities (an observation that he interjects into Irene’s attempt to explain how she uses sentences) is enough of a clue for the reader of Müller’s text to identify Calvino as the likely source. The reference is made unusually explicit in a text which itself almost completely refuses to employ specific references. Franz sends Irene a letter, in which he has written and sourced a long citation from the Calvino text, part of a description of a city named Irene.\(^{133}\) Franz finds the coincidence of Irene’s name shocking, just as before he found her description of the cars as ‘Gräber’ (86) shocking: ‘[d]as Buch heißt: Die

\(^{133}\) The citation forms the final lines of ‘Cities & Names 5’, Invisible Cities, pp. 99-100.
unsichtbaren Städte. Ich habe die Passage über die Stadt Irene vor Jahren angezeichnet. Ich habe sie damals mit keiner Person verbunden. Daß du jetzt so heißt, daß du so heißt, erschreckt mich.' (94) Whereas Irene, as we have seen, utilises the force of the random as a starting point for the imagination, coincidence for Franz suggests a loss of control that is anathema to him, a threat to his ordered world, in the same way that Irene’s impermeability to him is not only frustrating but also deeply threatening. The fact that he has singled out Irene, of all the cities depicted by Calvino, has everything to do with this fear, and it is significant as well as comical that he is now faced with a flesh and blood Irene who presents him with identical problems. His own struggle to reconcile this Irene with her city counterpart from the Calvino text is ironically aligned with the conceptual difficulties with which the text as a whole is concerned regarding the viability or desirability of stable identity formation. The citation from Invisible Cities is remarkably consonant with the thematic concerns of the new text, and the weight of Calvino’s whole text can be felt behind the short passage that is cited directly. Before considering the thematic intersections of the two texts more specifically, I want briefly to draw attention to the structure of the intertext, which I feel works strategically in the text as part of the production of the notion of the ‘foreign’ so central to the narrative.

The citation is provided with a double frame: the Müller text and the conversation between Franz and Irene, into which Invisible Cities is first introduced, encloses Franz’s letter to Irene, where the main citation figures. This enables the citation to be completely demarcated in the text, with the result that it stands out prominently as a discourse that is not (supposed to be) integrated in any way into the new text. In view of Irene’s comments on how words and sentences from other texts are assimilated over time, the marking of the Calvino text as ‘other’, that is, as a formal intertext qualitatively distinct from its host text, seems to break the mould. For if we follow Irene and her discussion of the process of absorption of the ‘other’ voice, we might well think
of that process as a pernicious muffling or complete silencing of that voice, which thus inevitably has to do with a contest of power, because it suggests that one voice can appropriate and regulate another. From a feminist standpoint, this is of particular interest. The issue of gender in ‘speaking for’ the silent other is paramount because in historical and cultural terms that condition of silence is the space reserved for women. Feminists have worked to make clearer the connection between a (noble) ethical responsibility concomitant with speaking on behalf of someone (in legal terms a child – and up until relatively recently a woman – described as unmündig by the law) and a less palatable potential or actual abuse of the position of power that the act confers. Irene’s discomfort with the notion of quotation is closely linked to her highly developed awareness of her own speech patterns and to language use as a whole (discussed above, pp. 223-6), hence her alertness to the process of discourse production that she sees all around her in the city. Individuals do not necessarily have full charge of their own words, because everything is context-dependent, and as such unreliable or subject to external effect. The ease with which we are dispossessed of our own voice is illustrated literally, significantly just after Irene has articulated the disjuncture between her vision and Franz’s, when Franz turns down the volume of the television, leaving the woman on the screen mouthing into empty space:

Irene hatte das Gefühl, daß Franz [der Frau] das Wort verbieten wollte. Irene sah den Mund der Frau an. Wüßte nicht, was sie sagte. Doch Irene wüßte, daß sie das, was die Frau sagte, zu Franz hätte sagen sollen. (86)

And later, Irene is equally incapable of voicing her desire: ‘[k]üß mich, hätte Irene gerne zu Franz gesagt. Sie schwieg.’ (89) The insubstantiality of the subjunctive in both cases is a grammatical counterpart to her failure to establish a definitive speaking position vis-à-vis Franz. I have already suggested that Irene’s very insecurity, in effect

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134 See Elizabeth Harvey’s study of male appropriations of the female voice in English texts of the early modern period, *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (London: Routledge, 1992). Harvey is concerned with the issue of textual gender ethics in representations of the female ‘other’; her use of the term ‘ventriloquism’ accords with Irene’s explanation of her own use of the ‘other’ voice, although not with the text’s.
reflecting the insecurity of the language that she inhabits, does offer a potentially revolutionary position, insofar as it refutes the possibility either of being in control or of being controlled. This is not unproblematic, by any means; her outsider position makes her into a detached observer of city life instead of a participant in it: ‘[i]n diesen Augenblicken wußte Irene, daß ihr Leben zu Beobachtungen geronnen war. Die Beobachtungen machten sie handlungsunfähig.’ (139) But in contrast to Franz, whose repetitive gestures denote a way of being that is so rigidly established as to have precluded any possibility of flexibility, Irene is still able to move about the city, literally and figuratively, and this suggests a certain autonomy, however paradoxical. The Calvino citation, in this sense, acts as a structural corollary to the (self-)alienated central figure, as it focuses, in a very literal manner, her own inhabitation of that sphere between belonging (she desires to make connections and be intelligible) and apartness (searching for the freedom denied under the Romanian dictatorship, she is horrified at the prospect of being absorbed into any homogenous cultural space).

The new text does not claim or absorb Calvino’s text, but graphically emphasises its non-belonging. In so doing, it substantiates the new text’s concern with the ‘foreign’, because by virtue of its status as intertext and, as such, a literary discourse radically ‘other’ in the Müller text, it inevitably challenges and undermines the centrality not just of Franz’s words (‘[d]er Satz ist ein Zitat, sagte Franz’ (92); [k]ein Wort ist von mir. Ich zitiere, schrieb Franz’ (94)) but also of Müller’s own. Not just the citation itself but also the name Irene represents the mark of the other author through the text, and acknowledges the extent of Calvino’s influence on Müller’s own work. In this respect, the focus on the other author also enables a corresponding shift of her own authorial self away from the centre of her text; it represents, as it were, a textual inhabitation of that
peripheral space so beloved of Müller. And it finds its complement, of course, in the figure of Irene who, like Calvino's city Irene, is a ghostly presence on the edge of a narrative of which she is yet the principal and entirely dominant subject. By the same token, however, the intertext's constitutive role in the new text makes it integrally part of the latter's particular constitution and part of the repertoire of effects that Müller employs. The reader is called upon to respond to a Calvino text no longer prior to the new text, but creatively rehoused within it. In this text, the intertextual effect is very different from that of Niederungen. As I tried to show in the previous chapter, that text's effect is accomplished by bringing the reader into the claustrophobic world of the child even while indicating and setting up the means for a critique of its abusive structures. Here, in sharp contrast, the overtly citational mode, most heavily evident in its use of Calvino, is a means not just of drawing attention to the growing fissure in the relationship between Irene and Franz, but to consider wider issues relating to communication and interpretation of the world we all inhabit. And, in a sense, it contributes to a narrative mode that emphatically refuses the notion of complicity between individuals and among communities.

So what of the Calvino intertext itself? What does it contribute to our reading of the new text, and, further, what does it have to say about how we read the text? In Marco Polo's description to the Khan, Irene is introduced as 'the city visible when you lean out from the edge of the plateau at the hour when the lights come on, and in the limpid air, the pink of the settlement can be discerned spread out in the distance below [...].' (99) It is seen from outside, from the plateau above, and it exists as the font of each viewer's imagination, each of whom view it from afar, guessing at its qualities, its internal affairs. To know it is thus, paradoxically, not to know it; its defining property is its radical unknowability: '[t]ravellers on the plateau, shepherds shifting their flocks, bird-

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135 See for example the interview with Annemarie Schuller, "Und ist der Ort, wo wir leben". Schreiben aus Unzufriedenheit. Gespräch mit der Schriftstellerin Herta Müller, Die Woche, 9 April 1982, p. 5.
catchers watching their nets, hermits gathering greens: all look down and speak of Irene. 

[...] Those who look down from the heights conjecture about what is happening in the city; they wonder if it would be pleasant or unpleasant to be in Irene that evening. Not that they have any intention of going there (in any case the roads winding down to the valley are bad), but Irene is a magnet for the eyes and thoughts of those who stay up above.' (99) For the Kublai Khan, whose interest in Marco Polo's descriptions is driven by the hope that by learning about his whole empire, he will more truly possess it, the city of Irene is an object lesson in defiance of his dream. The text goes on: '[a]t this point Kublai Khan expects Marco to speak of Irene as it is seen from within. But Marco cannot do this: he has not succeeded in discovering which is the city that those of the plateau call Irene.' (99) Of all the cities which Marco Polo 'brings back' to the Khan, this is the one which confirms most terribly the truth of that 'moment in the lives of emperors which follows pride in the boundless extension of the territories we have conquered, and the melancholy and relief of knowing we shall soon give up any thought of knowing and understanding them.' (10)\(^{136}\) Marco Polo's concluding words about the city, which explain why 'discovering which is the city [...] called Irene' is 'of slight importance' (99), are transcribed word for word by Franz in his letter to Irene:

"Sähe man die Stadt von innen, so wäre sie eine andere. Irene ist der Name für eine Stadt aus der Ferne, und nähert man sich ihr, so wird sie eine andere. Eins ist die Stadt für den, der vorbei kommt und nicht in sie hineingeht, ein anderes für den, der von ihr ergriffen wird und nicht aus ihr hinausgeht; eins ist die Stadt, in die man zum erstenmal kommt, ein anderes ist die, die man verläßt, um nicht zurückzukehren; jeder gebührt ein anderer Name; vielleicht hab ich von Irene schon unter verschiedenen Namen gesprochen; vielleicht habe ich überhaupt nur von Irene gesprochen." (Reisende auf einem Bein, 93-4) 

The looseness of the city's identity as it is initially presented as an indeterminate point below those on the plateau is such now that it dissolves altogether into a series of

\(^{136}\) Margaret Littler, who briefly considers the relevance of the Calvino intertext, uses the same quotation in support of her argument that the descriptions of the cities end up doing the opposite of what they were meant to do, namely 'to reassure the emperor of the extent and glory of his domination', because they 'resist any such appropriation. [...] Like Berlin in Müller's novel, the cities all resist male conquest, the locality of place asserts its difference from the abstract space of fatherland/empire.' Littler in Haines, ed., pp. 36-56 (p. 51).
different or of multiple cities. The repeated sequence '[e]ins [...] ein anderes', and the reiterated 'vielleicht' at the end of the passage combine with the insistence on the idea of Irene/the name to create a complex environment of words that are devoid of visual relief for the listening Khan, and for the reader. This marks out 'Cities & Names 5' from Marco Polo's other descriptions, which tend to be richly furnished with nouns and adjectives that encourage the imagination to form its own picture of each city. Here, the explorer leaves a tantalisingly open-ended text, whose indeterminacy is arguably the most eloquent expression that he finds for his project to warn the emperor of the limits of knowledge per se, and so wean him away from his obsessive search for it. Irene the city is, in effect, a highly provocative empty space in the text, and as such instructive, because it induces a sense of disorientation and frustration in the emperor and reader, similar, I would suggest, to that which Franz feels with regard to the 'mysterious' Irene. This indeterminacy allows us to see in relief the creative vision immanent to the text, even where it is conceived as absence (in the case of the city Irene), and reflect on our role in re-presenting it.

It is Franz who brings the citation into play in the text, and in doing so he recasts himself as a latter day Marco Polo, and Irene as that 'dark continent' mocking the male explorer with her mystery. Müller's version of 'unknowable woman' inevitably invokes this trope, but I think the text does by and large escape the charge of essentialism that might be laid at its door, in two ways. For a start, Irene's identity as woman is secondary to that of outsider, meaning that gender is reconfigured as just one aspect of broader socio-cultural issues that her experience addresses (although equally one could argue that as female equates with 'other', her gendered identity is integral to the articulation of this marginal position). And secondly, whilst the narrative does to some extent reinforce certain stereotypical features of heterosexual and homosexual gender identity, especially in its alignment of the straight male with power and powerful
discourse (whereby Thomas’ queerness makes him more of a ‘girl’, sharing a complicity with Irene which is broken only when he sleeps with her), it nevertheless employs the figure of the marginal woman as a critical textual resource: as we have seen, Irene’s fragmented vision and language pervasively invades that sense of wholeness in which the Berlin inhabitants seem to reside. Viewed from this perspective, everything, not just woman, is reconceived as opaque. Significantly, too, in making Irene the (female) traveller, Müller associates her with Marco Polo, and hence protects her from that objectifying male gaze.

Müller’s use of Calvino thus reinforces the oblique quality of her own Irene. What Franz sees as the coincidence of the two names and the shared qualities they represent is more fundamental still on a textual plane, because it enables the absolute semantic association of the two, and a corresponding association between the literal, realistic field of events (representing the cultural, political experience of Irene’s loss of Heimat) and the metaphorical plane of Calvino’s text. The intersplicing of Irene-as-city into a text concerned with Irene’s experience of the city requires us to broaden our conception of the central figure in that it refuses to allow us to think of her as a singular entity representable by traditional means. The paradox, for the reader, is that she is at once an image of unattainable distance, and yet all around us as we read: at one point, we are told that ‘[s]chon der Gedanke, sie könnte eines Tages wie diese Menschen den Horizont bewohnen, der Stadt gehöre, machte Irene unnahbar’ (129), yet this is an instance of the text that is challenged by the diffuseness of her sensation that ‘[m]al fiel die Stadt über Irenes Gedanken her. Mal Irenes Gedanken über die Stadt.’ (63) And the displacement that occurs when Irene, the name of a woman trying to negotiate her life in a city, becomes the name of the city is a peculiar textual dimension that we must negotiate each time we read the name. As one dimension is set within another, it also becomes its frame, never allowing us to fix one Irene at the centre of the text. The
movement we see is thus an exemplary demonstration of how a quotation is housed in a
text, being both inset and set outside and as such always framed by and framing the new
text.

Müller, in a recent interview, sets out her own understanding of the text, and her
words are certainly suggestive of a positive conceptualisation of Irene’s condition.
Asked whether she thinks that Irene has, at least partially, adapted to her new life, she
replies:

Ich weiß es nicht. Es ist ja auch nicht nur mitgebrachte Fremdheit, es ist auch die
Fremdheit, die immer wieder an Ort und Stelle entsteht. [...] Ich glaube nicht, daß es das
Ideale ist, nicht fremd zu sein. Die ideale Beziehung zu einer Umgebung ist aus meiner
Sicht eine Fremdheit, an die man sich gewöhnt. Fremdheit kann nicht ausgetragen
werden, weil sie eine Modalität der Wahrnehmung ist. Bewußte Wahrnehmung und
kritische Sicht werden immer Fremdheit zur Folge haben. (Haines, ed., 20)

The statement is useful for our understanding both of the protagonist and of the
authorial project as a whole. The narrative makes of us self-conscious readers by
refusing to let us forget the fragility of our own access to narrative, as a coded interplay
between sign and meaning. In this text, the simplicity of the lexicon and syntax belies
the intractability of the narrative, which withholds obvious meaning. Hence, the figure
of Irene is in place for us not as a key to decoding the narrative as such, but rather as a
sign, whereby her own negotiation of the territory of the city suggests a way for us to
read the text. It is in this sense that I find the Calvino intertext most suggestive, as it
takes us into the text of *Invisible Cities* at a point where the explorer is demonstrating
most lucidly the notion of the ‘eye of the beholder’ and its role in his own story-telling.

In giving us access to Calvino’s text, and making the elusive city Irene constitutive of
her central character, Müller finds a powerful expression for her own concern with the
‘foreign’. In reading, in our vain attempts to bring the protagonist into sight, and in our
very individual responses to the dis-located words of the narrative, we constantly slip
away from Irene and the text, reinforcing that quality of aloneness that Müller seeks to
represent.
Conclusion

It has been my intention over the course of this study to examine the role of intertext in the work of three very different authors and to explore the particular force of the intertextual voice, however it is manifested, within the narrative dynamic. I have set out the theories that this thesis sought to explore: namely, that the intertext can be understood as a focal point for articulating and responding critically and individually to issues of textual authority and control. It seems to me that for the author, intertextual modes are a means of legitimating her/his own role in setting out the text, but also of calling into question this role. In one sense, in taking possession, as it were, of a prior or exterior voice, idea or method, the author exerts her/his creative presence. Without this new creativity, the new text would buckle under the weight of what it invokes, becoming derivative instead of innovative. The transformative role of the new text is, as I hope I have shown, of critical importance in rehousing anterior material: in this way, Jelinek creates a critique of pornography, rather than pornography; Grass celebrates the possibilities of an eminently fictional, late twentieth-century Fontane even as he recalls the historical figure to the text; Müller draws on the structures and images of the Heimat genre as a way of radically interrogating its principles, and suggestively employs the Irene of Calvino’s imagination to extend the metaphorical force of her own envisioning. In another sense, though, the intertext must be seen to bear on the text in a particular way, challenging it as origin and bringing the reader urgently to the fore as someone responding to the signifying force of the text on a radically individual level. My inquiry has sought to illuminate that dialectical field of force, in its focus on the role that the intertext inevitably plays in undermining the sovereignty of the new text and making of it something that, whilst under the jurisdiction of the author, also constitutes the part of the text that s/he is least able to legislate for. I have argued that an intertextual method has served each of the authors in my study in strikingly different ways: the example of
Müller, in particular, shows how varied the approach can be from one text to another. And yet, despite the range of intertextual strategies operative in these texts, I would contend that in each case, the author makes use of the possibilities offered by the intertext as an especially unstable or insecure point of the text, not only to reflect, but also to facilitate reflection on, the themes that they variously address.

To a certain extent, we have also seen the value of a theory that sees all text as intertext, that situates each text in relation to all the discourses into and out of which it is born. We can, I suggest, productively analyse a text with regard to what has gone before, the weight of literary and cultural tradition on which author and reader alike depend to orientate themselves in the contemporary fictional world. And we can, by the same token, usefully retain the term as a way of understanding how the text is embedded in its own cultural and political environment. Insofar as a text is dependent on contemporary discourses and values for its intelligibility, it is not only subject to but integrally part of its environment; equally, though, the process of narration and fictionalisation establishes it as being outside that environment. The advantage of this extremely broad conceptualisation of the term, to my mind, is that it provides us with a critical framework for thinking about the different responses to texts, in two ways. Firstly, we can better account for the way that a text is written and received in a particular manner within groups of similar cultural background and formalise the variants between groups. It is important to attend to the fact that identifiable reading communities do exist, even if in practical terms individuals are always members of various different groups, since it allows us to look more closely at how pre-existent collective modes of interpretation relate to the signifying modes of individual texts. Secondly, we can use this broad understanding of intertext to explore the dynamics that are set up on an individual level, that is, between a single reader and the text, even where that 'reader' is either, of necessity, an abstract figure, or myself, the critic.
own understanding and analysis of these texts reflects the partiality of response to texts: what I have found suggestive might well pass other readers by, and the text will speak in ways to them that it does not to me. The category of intertext as a vast array of significations can aid us in our understanding of the text’s varying subjective appeal, and in this respect represents a resource for understanding the complexities of textuality as a whole. And it is, therefore, an equally valid analytical tool whether the text in question is ancient or modern, fiction or non-fiction.

What I have found myself returning to once and again in this study, however, is something that I would venture to be rather more specific to literature and literary critique of the last few decades, as the relationship between author and reader has evolved to a point where the reader is increasingly acknowledged as a (co-)creator of texts. In texts that are technically, methodologically and thematically so very different, there is nonetheless a similarity to be seen in the way that the narrative stance abdicates an objectivising, superior position. Yet, undoubtedly, each of these texts urgently engages with questions of morality and of the human condition, and each of them is deeply concerned with setting out and legitimating political and social critiques. My analysis of the role of intertext has constantly come back to the issue of how the reader might be permitted – or forced – to respond to a text whose author has refused to take up a position in or outside the text that pertains to a moral high ground. This is not to say that there is an absence of moral questioning: far from it. Yet the texts are suggestive of a resistance to a narrative perspective that claims to evaluate from on high: the narrative voice is made to generate a critical vision rather than to spell it out, and the reader is asked to consolidate rather than go along with this vision. This is the room for manoeuvre that is, to my mind, established for the reader by way of the intertextual dimension of each text, which provocatively invites a critical, individual response. Nevertheless, this response is always produced as an effect of the narrative
and thus must also be thought of as an act of assent, a willingness to be manouevred into a particular critical relationship with the text that fully accords with the direction and the implications of the narrative line.

Like much of the literature of the last few decades, these texts are highly self-aware, managing to capture perfectly the sense of their own time and its preoccupations. As such, they stand as reportage of the *Zeitgeist*, reflecting a society that has an increasingly sophisticated knowledge of the self and its position in the world. The vast repertoire of quotational effects that we see employed in each of these narratives is common to many recent texts of both high and low culture, a development that can be viewed in tandem with rapid technological advances. The fast, internet and TV driven culture encourages ever more conscious self-examination, and literature bears witness to this tendency as much as anything else. Yet something marks out some texts, these among them, as exceptional. They manage not only to reproduce and quote from the age, but also to transform this quotation into a comment and reflection on its qualities, that is, to supply it with form and understanding. And in so doing, they succeed in generating a critical perspective on their subject without ever moving away from it into a moralising position that claims to represent an absolute truth or to possess an absolute knowledge. Each of these texts insists on a way of reading that re-instates a critique, whilst refusing to allow us the luxury of feeling privileged by our competence in supplying it. Each of them seems to pose questions, of themselves and of their reader: how can we, who explicitly resist the grand narratives of the past, still find critical purchase without descending into a meaningless relativism? In the absence of a singular, dogmatic vision, what other ways are there for authors to legitimate their own position, and for readers to challenge not only what the texts say, but also our own response to them? The particular dimension of the intertext, and the complex dynamic
that it represents in the textual body, is something we can surely look to as we debate these questions.
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