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978-0-521-09295-1 - Christa Wolf's Utopian Vision: From Marxism to Feminism

Anna K. Kuhn

Excerpt

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I

INTRODUCTION:
SETTING THE CONTEXT

In the twenty-six years since her emergence as a writer of imaginative literature, Christa Wolf has become one of the leading figures of German letters and the foremost female voice of the German-speaking world. Inherently political, her writing is both subtle and subversive. As she has matured, her themes have become more complex and the problems she addresses broader. The increasing universality of her writing, the immediacy and compelling relevance of her most recent works have helped earn her the international reputation she enjoys today. The East German writer of the early 1960s has evolved into a writer of world stature in the eighties. Abandoning the Socialist Realism that had influenced her early works, *Moscow Novella* (1961) and *The Divided Heaven* (1963), Christa Wolf established a distinctive style and set of concerns with *The Quest for Christa T.* (1968) and *Patterns of Childhood* (1976).

These novels were at first severely criticized in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) both for their complex experimental form and for their unorthodox subject matter. Christa T.'s claim to the right of individual self-fulfillment within the socialist collective and the narrator's need in *Patterns of Childhood* to come to terms with her Nazi past (from which the GDR totally dissociated itself) were considered taboo subjects. In the interim, the reception of *Christa T.* has changed radically – today the book is viewed as a classic, aimed at strengthening the socialist state through internal criticism.¹ It remains to be seen whether *Patterns of Childhood* will enjoy a similar rehabilitation.

In 1976 the dissident poet Wolf Biermann was expatriated, abruptly ending a period of liberalization that had begun in 1971, when Erich Honecker lifted all taboos for truly committed socialist writers at the Eighth Party Congress. Perhaps the precarious political situation in the GDR following Biermann's expatriation prompted Wolf to camouflage her social criticism in historical

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subject matter. Set in 1804, *No Place on Earth* (1979) portrays the fictitious encounter between the Romantic poets Heinrich von Kleist and Karoline von Günderode, whose alienation and unhappiness obviously parallel the experiences of some citizens of the GDR – including Wolf, for whom Biermann's exile and its aftermath precipitated a crisis. In her portrayal of these writers, both of whom committed suicide, Wolf treats the role of gender in their dilemmas and thus foreshadows concerns specifically addressed in *Cassandra* (1983).

Two trends are discernible in Wolf's work to date: a movement away from the present into the past in terms of subject matter, and an increasing concern with women's issues, particularly the role of the woman writer. These two trends converge in Wolf's feminist reinterpretation of the Cassandra story, in which Wolf moves into mythical times to continue her criticism of contemporary society.

The critical reception of Christa Wolf has been unique. No East German author has been as widely discussed by critics in both German states and in the United States. In the two Germanies, critics agree that Christa Wolf is a significant writer. With respect to particular works, however, the critical reception of Wolf in the Federal Republic has been almost the obverse of that in the German Democratic Republic. Molded by the Cold War politics of the fifties and early sixties, the ideological bias of most German criticism has led critics to praise or censure her works according to their opinion of the GDR and their perception of Christa Wolf's relationship to the socialist state. Critics in both countries, however, interpreted her first major work, *Divided Heaven*, in terms of the prevailing GDR aesthetic of Socialist Realism. This established a precedent that prevailed long after it ceased to be appropriate. The explicitly political theme of *Divided Heaven* predetermined the response to her later, less easily defined works. While noting the more personal tone of Wolf's second novel, *The Quest for Christa T.*, most German critics in both countries continued to interpret it and its successor, *Patterns of Childhood*, preeminently in the political context of GDR literature.

The reception of Christa Wolf's work in the context of GDR society and politics has tended to obscure the extent to which *Christa T.* marks a turning point in her writing. Political interpretation of her middle works in particular, by understating the utopian dimension of her more subjective writing, has caused Wolf's latest works to appear as greater anomalies than they are. While *No Place on Earth* disrupts the overtly autobiographical

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mode of Wolf's earlier works, the novel develops themes that have played an important role in Wolf's writing since *Christa T.* Indeed, even *Cassandra*, which uses myth to criticize patriarchal values and to reevaluate the literary canon, sustains a continuity with her earlier works through its criticism of both East and West and through its evocation of a utopian alternative.

Recent American feminist critics do not stress the GDR contextual aspect of Christa Wolf's writing, but instead see her in terms of feminist politics. The specifically female aspect of Wolf's writing, overlooked by (predominantly male) German critics, has been the focus of scholarship by women. Feminist scholarship has illuminated the problematic relationship of the woman writer to language in a patriarchal world, and has noted the interrelationship between the articulation of female subjectivity (the theme of the "difficulty of saying 'I'") and Wolf's narrative techniques. The chief virtue of this scholarship, in addition to making readers sensitive to gender issues in Wolf's writing, has been to point to the potential for a more formalistic, linguistically oriented approach to her works and to establish the methodological framework for such an investigation. However, to the extent that it focuses on the subjective experience of the female individual to the exclusion of the broader socio-historical and cultural context, this feminist scholarship is also reductionist.

Although Wolf is sometimes treated in the context of "New Subjectivity," her work differs from this West German literary movement of the seventies in that, despite the psychological depth of her characters, despite her emphasis on personal experience, she never presents subjective experience in a vacuum. Instead, the individual subject is always presented in a dialectical relationship with the larger social community. This relationship finds its linguistic expression in the shift between the individual ("I") and the collective ("we") voice in Wolf's texts. Just as Wolf speaks not merely for herself but also, and quite consciously, for her generation, her use of first-person narrative ensures at once specificity and typicality.

While the GDR context-related and the feminist avenues of inquiry have yielded the most fruitful insights into Wolf's work, each approach in itself is inadequate for a proper understanding of her complex and sophisticated writing. Christa Wolf is an *East German woman writer* and consideration must be given to each facet of her identity if one is to do justice to her work. Just as Wolf scholarship has often tended toward reductionism, it has also failed

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to clarify the interrelatedness of Christa Wolf's entire *œuvre*. As on a giant tapestry, strands from one work are interwoven into the next as new ones are being spun that connect with future works. This intermeshing is not limited to matters of content but includes formal aspects of Wolf's writing as well, making it virtually impossible to treat any of her works in isolation. Proceeding chronologically, I use a close textual analysis to examine Christa Wolf's fiction and essays as they interrelate. While I do not attempt to analyze each text exhaustively, I follow some of the strands of Wolf's literary tapestry, arguing that her work expresses the integration of the various aspects of her identity. (The following focus on each of the aspects of Christa Wolf's self-understanding is merely a heuristic device for placing her work in context and understanding the problems it presents. Indeed, the distinctions between aspects are artificial and cannot be sustained even in this introduction.)

East German woman writer: The highly politicized nature of literature in East-bloc countries means that any discussion of Christa Wolf must be framed in the context of the national and cultural politics of the GDR. A member of a society that experienced the imposition of socialism from above, Wolf enthusiastically embraced Marxism and has worked toward the realization of Marxist humanist ideals in GDR praxis. Augmenting her literary engagement with political commitment, she has been an active member of the Socialist Unity Party (SED = Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) and for several years was a candidate for a position in the ruling Central Committee.²

Clearly Marxist theory, by providing her with the tools for an economic analysis of history, helped Wolf to understand what had happened in Germany between 1933 and 1945. More importantly, however, Marx's vision of an egalitarian, nonexploitative community filled her with hope. Like many of her compatriots, Wolf saw in socialism the means for achieving a qualitatively new and morally superior social order that would help prevent a repetition of recent German history by transforming human beings from objects into subjects of history.³ Over the years, however, Wolf has become more and more critical of the form of socialism that has evolved in the GDR and increasingly more sceptical about her society's ability to implement the revolution in social relations necessary to create subjects of history.

Yet while Wolf's *œuvre* can be read as testimony to her increas-

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ing disenchantment with her society, she is still a member of the Party, chooses to live in the GDR, and remains committed to the ideals of socialism as conceived by Marx. The theme of the coming-into-being of human subjectivity (*das Subjektwerden des Menschen*) so central to her work and her insistence on individual self-actualization within the collective are compatible with Marx's vision of free social individuality within a communal society. The discrepancy between Marxist theory and the often repressive reality of the GDR has not destroyed Wolf's faith in the possibility of human community. In her recent works, in which she continues to examine modes of human objectification and alienation, Wolf has explored the feminist critique of Marxism. By analyzing patriarchal attitudes (still prevalent in the socialist East) and their destructive effects on both sexes, she has created works that make a universal appeal. In particular, her lament that reason has been perverted to mere utilitarian pragmatism and her fear that the East, by mimicking the West, by failing to repudiate instrumental rationality, has failed to present a viable alternative to this self-destructive world view, has immediate global relevance. The urgency of Wolf's argument, her belief that the lack of a viable alternative may well lead to the annihilation of humankind, is particularly compelling in light of recent world political events and may explain the enormous popularity she has attained in the past several years.

Despite their often bleak subject matter, Wolf's works never end in despair. Indeed, one of the salient features of her writing is the quiet optimism of even her most critical works. The element of hope in Wolf's writing stems largely from her Marxist perspective. Although Christa T., Karoline von Günderrode, Heinrich von Kleist, and Cassandra succumb to the lack of livable alternatives, Wolf holds fast to her belief in socialism's capacity to change human consciousness and to create such alternatives. She shares the socialist faith in literature's power to teach. But more than that, she has a fundamental faith in human beings and their ability to learn from the experiences of her characters. Literature for Wolf allows both the writer and the reader to play through possible (self-)destructive scenarios vicariously. Although many of Wolf's figures die because they cannot exist in the societies into which they are born, all remain uncompromising in their quest for self-actualization. The implication that, given a different, more humane social order, these figures could survive, is clearly meant as an incentive to readers to attend to aspects of their society impeding

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the development of human subjectivity. Thus Wolf's work keeps alive the hope of a humane socialism, even as it records the betrayal of contemporary socialism in the GDR.

One of Wolf's deepest commitments is to the emergence of nonalienated subjectivity as formulated by Marx. Perhaps the most serious obstacle to this is the GDR's self-deceptive attitude toward its National Socialist past. Marx believed that the basis of humane community was a revolution in social relations, which would allow people to see others as independent subjects and not merely in relation to themselves, that is, as objects. This community is predicated on the idea of reintegrative subjectivity. On the one hand, individuals must be able to recognize their objectification of and by others in order to overcome alienation and to attain mutual subjectivity, mutual regard for one another as human subjects. On the other hand, they must be able to empathize with one another's situation in order to experience a sense of their shared humanity. Yet clearly the ability to recognize another's subjectivity presupposes an individual's psychic integration. In the GDR, official Party policy has inhibited the process of psychological integration by effectively severing its citizens from their personal history. By calling the populace victims of National Socialism rather than its collaborators, it has prevented East Germans from becoming reconciled with their past and has fostered self-alienation, a phenomenon Wolf addresses most eloquently in *Patterns of Childhood*. Wolf's concern with achieving a heightened self-awareness as a prerequisite for overcoming alienation makes the question of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (a coming to terms with the Nazi past) an urgent one for her. Indeed, it informs her writing in *Patterns of Childhood*.

In order to understand the significance of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* for the Germans, it will be helpful to recall their situation in 1945. At the end of World War II, a defeated, divided, and morally bankrupt Germany faced the task of rebuilding its cities, reconstructing its economy, and reassessing its history. The economic miracle (*Wirtschaftswunder*) of the Adenauer era and the Marshall Plan transformed the Federal Republic of Germany into the industrial and economic leader of Europe, and the German Democratic Republic emerged as the most prosperous Soviet-bloc country. Yet the accomplishment of overcoming seemingly insurmountable economic obstacles pales when compared with the task still facing the East and West German states and their people: the need to confront the National Socialist past.

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The occupation forces addressed the issue of moral culpability in the upper echelons of the Nazi party through the Nürnberg War Trials (1945–6), but such uniform, immediate, and direct action was not possible in the case of the populace at large. The Allies had agreed that a denazification program was needed. However, after the confrontation between the Western and Eastern powers (1947) and the escalation of the Cold War, methods for purging Nazi elements and for implementing reeducation programs varied in the four occupied zones. The French, British, and American sectors, operating with the concept of collective guilt, set up an elaborate bureaucracy for denazification that lagged behind the more rigorous and consistent measures of the Soviets.⁴ In the Soviet sector the removal of former Nazi party members from public life (including the dismissal of more than 20,000 teachers in 1945), coupled with the institution of a “law for the democratization of the German school,”⁵ that is, a centralized school system reform, ensured that education reinforced reeducation. Yet the Soviets, who had originally subscribed to the Allied concept of collective guilt, increasingly distanced themselves from this view as East and West moved toward an ideological division of Germany.

With the founding of the GDR on 7 October 1949 (in response to the creation of the Federal Republic on 21 September 1949) came an official severance of the East Germans from their Nazi past. Since its socialism was not the result of a revolution from below but had been imposed by Soviet occupation forces, the GDR felt obliged to legitimize itself by evoking the liberal legacy of 1848 and the social democratic heritage of the Weimar Republic (1918–33) and by creating the myth of wide-scale anti-Nazi resistance in the Third Reich. Viewing itself as the continuation of a progressive German tradition brutally crushed by the National Socialist state, the GDR accepted the Soviet definition of the Russian invasion as the liberation “of the German people from the yoke of fascism.”⁶ By casting its citizenry in the role of victims, the Party obviated the need to assess its immediate past and to assume responsibility for Hitler and the atrocities committed between 1933 and 1945. Rather than examining the events of the past, the GDR chose to develop the new socialist society, substituting the concept of the “scientific-technological revolution” for the revolution in social relations envisaged by Marx, that is, exchanging means for ends. Particularly in its early *Aufbau* phase, the period of socialist development and consolidation (c. 1949–61), it concentrated on changing the means of production. This reductionist view of socialism, prevalent long

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after the removal of the economic exigencies that had confronted the emerging socialist state, has been a frequent target of Christa Wolf's criticism.

Christa Wolf was sixteen years old in 1945. She belongs to the generation that experienced the transition from Nazism to socialism, an experience that not only shaped her but that also constitutes an important theme of her early and middle works. Her autobiographical novel, *Patterns of Childhood*, records the decisive experiences of her early years. Born in 1929 in Landsberg on the Warthe River, approximately 130 kilometers northeast of Berlin,⁷ Wolf grew up in the Third Reich. *Patterns of Childhood* reconstructs her childhood under Nazism and records the traumatic break in her life caused by the invasion of the Red Army; her family's flight West; and her experiences under American, French, and Soviet occupation forces. By explicitly addressing the taboo issue of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which had always implicitly informed her literary writing, Wolf was psychologically able to leave behind the inquiry into personal history that had characterized her writing. Delving ever further back in time, she was able to develop new narrative forms through which to examine broader historical contexts in their relationship to contemporary society.

Very much a product of her transitional generation, Wolf has treated, in literary and essayistic works as well as in interviews, the difficult and lengthy process of reassessment and reorientation that confronted her and her contemporaries after the war. Not until autumn 1948,⁸ two years after graduating from the *Gymnasium* in Bad Frankenhausen near Schwerin, where her family had relocated, did Christa Wolf read her first Marxist work. Her encounter with Marxist thought and the subsequent rise of her socialist consciousness precipitated a fundamental reassessment of values.

Wolf's humanistic vision of socialism was intensified by her studies at the University of Leipzig (1949–53). In Leipzig, then the leading intellectual center of the GDR,⁹ Wolf studied with the eminent Germanist Hans Mayer. Mayer was a Marxist thinker in the Hegelian dialectical tradition, a Third Reich émigré recently returned to the German socialist state. It is one of the tragic ironies of GDR history that thinkers like Hans Mayer and the philosopher Ernst Bloch (also lecturing in Leipzig at the time), people whose concern with the humanistic potential of Marxism might have helped implement a socialist order closer to the Marxian model, were among those attacked as revisionists.¹⁰ With the erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, it became palpably clear to Mayer

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and Bloch that their vision of socialism could not soon be realized in the GDR, and they emigrated once again. Just as Mayer and Bloch were unable to endure the discrepancy between Marxist theory and GDR praxis, the tension between socialist ideal and reality was to become of increasing concern for Christa Wolf.

East German woman writer: Wolf's identity as a German is inextricably bound to the GDR's national self-understanding and its cultural politics with regard to the German tradition. Orienting itself politically in accordance with the Soviet model of communism, the GDR declared 1945 as a historical cesura and 1949 as the beginning of a qualitatively new social order. The official aesthetic governing literary production, Stalinist Socialist Realism, was deemed a necessity of cultural politics; its objective was to help develop and consolidate socialism in the GDR. Socialist Realism provides the mimetic theory of art with a socialist telos. That is, it holds that the purpose of art is to record social dynamics and conflicts from the perspective of the ultimate triumph of socialism. The doctrines of Socialist Realism, as articulated at the first congress of the Soviet writers' union in 1934, were appropriated in toto by the GDR. The four main precepts are: (1) the primacy of industrial production for society, hence a devaluation of portraying the private sphere in favor of the world of work in artistic production; (2) a mandate for the creation of positive heroes, portrayed as actively engaged in the socialist struggle, as the norm; (3) a call for socialist literature to appropriate critically its "classical heritage" (*klassisches Erbe*); (4) the positing of the inherently didactic function of literature which, by rendering a "truthful presentation of real life," is meant to effect an "ideological transformation and education of working people in the spirit of socialism."¹¹ Adherence to this restrictive aesthetic, with its insistence on *Parteilichkeit* (alignment with Marxist-Leninist Party policy) and on an ideologically conceived category of typicality (positive hero as norm, as an allegory of the State) severely inhibited or excluded nonmimetic experimental forms of literary production, bred homogeneity and sterility, and engendered fierce literary debates on the theory of realism.

This barren literary aesthetic was overturned by the Hungarian-born critic Georg Lukács. Until the Hungarian uprising in 1956, when he was deposed, Lukács enjoyed virtual intellectual hegemony in questions of literary realism in the GDR. He was responsible for broadening the parameters of the realist canon in the

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postwar period to include works by nonsocialist writers. His contribution to the realism debate must be assessed in the context of GDR cultural politics, which aimed at establishing the continuity of the German intellectual and literary tradition. To this end, literary historians evoked the humanistic heritage of the *Weimarer Klassik* (the classical period of Goethe and Schiller, c. 1786–1832) and engaged in lengthy debates as to which works of presocialist German literature were to be admitted into the new socialist canon (the *Erbediskussion*). Introducing the concept of “critical realism,” which he opposed to Socialist Realism, Lukács entered the debate and reoriented the realist aesthetic toward the bourgeois novelists of the nineteenth century – Balzac, Dickens, and Tolstoy as well as Theodor Fontane and Thomas Mann. Lukács’s concept of “totality,” the basis of his theory of realism, enabled him to include writers who would otherwise have been condemned as late-capitalistic decadents. In Lukács’s view, the great realists of previous eras were such masters at capturing the social dynamics of their particular society in its contradictory totality that unintentionally, by sheer virtue of their genius, they illuminate the irresolvable contradictions in their societies and thus point to the inevitable downfall of capitalism.

While Lukács’s work greatly enhanced the realism debate in the GDR, it effectively stifled formal innovation through its anachronistic orientation and rejection of modernistic literary trends. Although the concept of totality allowed Lukács to reject certain mimetic art forms such as naturalism as the merely superficial reflection of external reality, his mandate for “objectivity” caused him to repudiate nonmimetic, subjective, “irrational,” “solipsistic” movements such as Romanticism, Impressionism, and Expressionism. After Stalin’s death (1953) Socialist Realist norms were ironically more – not less – rigorously enforced than before, and Lukács fell into disrepute as a revisionist. Only very recently has the GDR begun to reevaluate its position on writers excluded from Lukács’s canon, the Romantics and modernist writers such as Kafka.¹² Thus it is obvious why Christa Wolf, who experimented with narrative perspective as early as *Divided Heaven* and has incorporated a number of modernist writing strategies, has thwarted her socialist critics. A further obstacle has been her insistence on active reader participation in the (re)constitution of the text, a phenomenon that is anathema to Socialist Realism’s call for “objectivity.” In place of Socialist Realism’s emotional identification with typical characters, Wolf places intellectual demands