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

Anna K. Kuhn

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CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN GERMAN

CHRISTA WOLF'S UTOPIAN VISION

This is the first book-length chronological study in English of Christa Wolf's works. It traces the development and continuity of the writer's major themes and concerns against the backdrop of her constantly evolving relationship to Marxism, and documents the rise of her feminist consciousness. It does not, however, focus only on political and feminist issues, but addresses all facets of Wolf's identity (East – German – woman – writer) by showing how her works reflect her own self-understanding.

Forced by the clash between her vision of a humane socialism and the practice of socialism she observed in the German Democratic Republic to reassess her role as a writer and critic, Wolf broke through to her unique style in *The Quest for Christa T.*, a work initially repudiated in the GDR both for its unorthodox subject matter and for its unconventional form. Since then, Wolf has effectively challenged the restrictions placed on writers in the GDR by writing on topics such as the Nazi past (*Patterns of Childhood*), Romanticism (*No Place on Earth*), patriarchal attitudes in the GDR (*Cassandra*) and most recently the Chernobyl nuclear disaster (*Störfall*).

Anna K. Kuhn shows how Christa Wolf, by adhering to her self-imposed concept of writing as "subjective authenticity," has broadened the parameters of what is acceptable in her society.

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Christa Wolf

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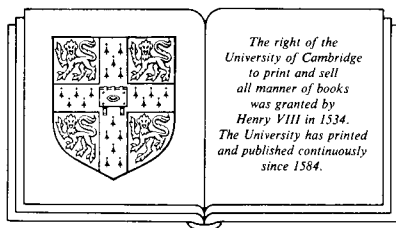
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Creative practice is thus of many kinds. It is already, and actively, our practical consciousness. When it becomes struggle – the active struggle for new consciousness through new relationships that is the ineradicable emphasis of the Marxist sense of self-creation – it can take many forms. It can be the long and difficult remaking of an inherited (determined) practical consciousness: a process often described as development but in practice a struggle at the roots of the mind – not casting off an ideology, or learning phrases about it, but confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self and in the hard practical substance of effective and continuing relationships. It can be more evident practice: the reproduction and illustration of hitherto excluded and subordinated models; the embodiment and performance of known but excluded and subordinated experiences and relationships; the articulation and formation of latent, momentary, and newly possible consciousness.

Raymond Williams

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But most of all I must thank Christa Wolf. When I started this project, I had no inkling of the adventure on which I was about to embark, an adventure in which I would learn more not only about this writer but about myself as well. The study of German language

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and literature (*Germanistik*) is a very male discipline. This may well account for the fact that during my years of study the only woman writer I encountered was Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, the one “accepted” female writer in the German academic canon. My work on Christa Wolf has forced me to reassess my life as a woman, a teacher and a scholar. I have learned to challenge the fundamental authoritarian bases of my profession and have questioned what, as a woman, my role at the university could and should be. I have had to confront the destructive structures of the academy and become painfully aware of the price of “success” in human terms in an institution predicated on competition, achievement and the belief that intellectual property is our most valuable commodity. I have become increasingly aware of how my profession causes human emotions to atrophy, preaching a religion of “objectivity,” encouraging us to sever our emotions from our intellect.

While Wolf’s writing has changed my view-scope in very fundamental ways, it has also made me painfully aware of how ingrained my own patterns of behavior are. So that while I have come to recognize that the assumptions at the very center of our discipline are wrong, are *verkehrt*, perverse in Wolf’s sense of the word, that the concept of “objectivity” is itself an ideological construct, a subjective statement, I nonetheless still find myself a prisoner of those assumptions, having been trained by “experts” in that ideology. Like Wolf, I have found it difficult to say “I,” at least in the context of the “objective” discourse of literary scholarship. It is very hard to unlearn years of training in which we were assiduously taught never, under any circumstances, to write in the first person. And in which the notion of relevance, relating our studies to our own realities, was considered bad form at best, pernicious at worst.

I am slowly learning to speak in my own voice, am beginning to articulate my needs as a woman engaged in the study and teaching of German literature and culture, am asking – more and more insistently – where all the women writers are whom we never read, am questioning not only the male valuation of female writers, but also the relevance of much male writing, with its one-sided perspective on the world. I’ve changed, or perhaps I should say, I’m changing. And by changing, I’ve challenged some very basic assumptions and called some cherished views into question.

Through Christa Wolf I have been introduced to the works of Karoline von Günderrode and Bettina von Arnim. *No Place on Earth* and Wolf’s essays on the Romantics gave me access to the writers of this period, a period for which I had never had any use.

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I've come to appreciate the subversive elements in their thinking, no longer consider them regressive and *welfremd* (out of touch with reality). Wolf has led me to read Anna Seghers, Ingeborg Bachmann and, of course, Ernst Bloch. Perhaps I would have become familiar with these writers anyway. But they don't belong to the canon of *Germanistik* any more than she does, so I'm not certain. At any rate, it would have taken a lot longer and I wouldn't have seen them through her eyes. Christa Wolf's relentless honesty and self-scrutiny are inspiring and serve as a model for me, encouraging me to confront my own life. Ultimately her work has given me the courage to criticize, to review, to reassess, to rethink and to restart. I owe her an enormous debt.

This book is dedicated to SWAP.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- BE Essay on Bettine von Arnim: "Nun ja! Das nächste Leben geht aber heute an." In *Fortgesetzter Versuch: Aufsätze, Gespräche, Essays*. Leipzig: Reclam, 1982.
- BP Büchner Prize Speech: "Von Büchner sprechen. Darmstädter Rede." Trans. Henry J. Schmidt, "Shall I Garnish a Metaphor with an Almond Blossom?" in *New German Critique* 23 (Spring/Summer 1981): 3–11.
- C *Cassandra* narrative. In *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. Trans. Jan van Heurck. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984.
- CON "Conditions of a Narrative." Wolf's Frankfurt Lectures on Poetics. In *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*.
- CP "Change of Perspective" ("Blickwechsel"). Trans. A. Leslie Willson. In Elizabeth Rütschi Herrmann and Edna Huttenmaier Spitz, eds., *German Women Writers of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Pergamon, 1978.
- CT *The Quest for Christa T.* Trans. Christopher Middleton. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972.
- DH *Divided Heaven*. Trans. Joan Becker. New York: Adler's Foreign Books, 1981.
- GE Essay on Karoline von Günderrode: "Der Schatten eines Traumes." In *Fortgesetzter Versuch*.
- MN *Moskauer Novelle* (Moscow Novella). Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1961.
- NP *No Place on Earth*. Trans. Jan van Heurck. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982.
- PoC *Patterns of Childhood*. Trans. Ursule Molinaro and Hedwig Rappolt. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984.
- RW *The Reader and the Writer: Essays, Sketches, Memories*. Trans. Joan Becker. New York: International Publishers, 1977.
- S *Störfall. Nachrichten eines Tages*. Darmstadt/Neuwied: Luchterhand 1987.