Santa Monica of the Turn: Catastrophe and Commitment in an Autobiography of Collaboration

Author(s): Benjamin Robinson

Source: *New German Critique*, Autumn, 2001, No. 84 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 89-128

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/827799

Santa Monica of the Turn: Catastrophe and Commitment in an Autobiography of Collaboration

Benjamin Robinson

WELCOME TO SANTA MONICA
A dying man enters the hotel lobby
Where other terminal cases are killing time
More or less quickly between birth and death
With business deals or alone with the shot glass
From which amnesia rises The new guest
Is marked by another sort of death
His face his hands gaze and stride
Almost an angel Or a copper engraving
By Dürer the pedant of Melancholy
A man embraces him he is well-fed
His days are not yet numbered
If one is to trust appearances
They disappear behind a column I see
The healthy man sitting in a chair
And a hand almost without flesh brushing
The top of his head once many times
It can't stop it's counting the hours
In front of the EMBASSY our little hotel
With the defective heating *OLD WORLD CHARM*
Says a plaque by the door ENTRY FORBIDDEN
A veteran is crying over his cat
Who's snuck into the hotel garden to hide
HE'S MY ONLY FRIEND IN LIFE YOU KNOW
I WATCH HIM I'M NOT ALLOWED TO ENTER THE GARDEN
I'M AFRAID THEY STOLE HIM THE NAME IS TIGER
Life is not our noblest possession
TIGER'S THE NAME TIGER TIGER
– Heiner Müller

I. Kairos and Continuity: A Real Socialist in the Liberal Imagination

Creative writers – "and they are the people we are talking about, aren't they, along with other artists, not the philosophers and social scientists on both sides" of Germany, Christa Wolf asks Jürgen Habermas[1] – are hard to come to terms with publicly, especially when they have become political figures through their autobiographical fictions. Whatever terms we eventually come to, these creative writers are, as Habermas recognizes about his own "daily work," due their own special language. "Naturally, I make my contributions from my perspective, but one has to talk about philosophical questions philosophically, sociological questions sociologically, political questions politically. One has to know which discourse one is operating in, what tools one is employing, at which level of generality one is speaking."[2] Yet what a fabulous discourse Christa Wolf has become, so difficult to specialize, and so disappointingly leveled by the established rhetorics of the literary public sphere.[3] As much as Habermas himself would try to bind her with linguistic assent into the Western alliance that had liberated him and the *Geist* of Kant in 1945, the language by and about her explodes erratically all over the end of the twentieth century and the systemic lines of its progress. Its reckless power at once to surprise and sober, however, does not lie in any language of critique that she and her eager solicitors from all sides of topical literary debate would like to see in it. On the contrary, its heady failures, its ramshackle assemblages of oxymoronic

1. Christa Wolf, "The Leftover Baggage of German History: Correspondence with Jürgen Habermas," *Parting from Phantoms*, trans. Jan van Heurck (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997) 122.

2. Jürgen Habermas, *The Past as Future* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1994) 114.

3. I should mention by contrast David Bathrick's *The Powers of Speech* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995), a politically realistic post-Wall positioning of GDR literature whose breadth and rigor encourage thought about East German culture rather than belittling it. Sharing what Bathrick characterizes as Heiner Müller's quasi-Elizabethan assessment of the GDR writer's relationship to "power," I inflect socialist "power" in a more rational than real-political manner and Western "power" in a more real-political than rational manner than he does. Specifically regarding Wolf, my project is to recuperate the universal disposition of her socialist experience seen from the standpoint not only of united Germany, but from an international point of view. The centrality of Habermas as my negative interlocutor has to do with this project. Habermas's definition of a left-progressive German politics is confusing for a non-German left, in that the United States and its military-political alliances with Europe become for Habermas the positive antidote to Germany's potential return to the ways of a Bismarkian middle European power. The high value that Habermas accords the United States' normative orientation toward justice is here contested.

affects and intentions, its spectacular vulnerability to and exposure of demoralized self-consciousness and reflection all mark a phenomenology of twentieth-century incompletion that splutters "life," albeit melancholy and slaphappy, at the stories we hear that history is safe at last within the reach of our deliberation.[4]

It is important to recognize the origins of Wolf's novels and essays in the harsh pioneer ("Aufbau") bureaucratic culture fostered by the Soviet Military Administration of defeated Nazi Germany, a time, as Wolf said, of "the crudest class struggle in literature."[5] Her subsequent refusal to become conversant in the language of Western integration is what prevents her writing from being either "contained" as a provincial curiosity by literary conservatives or corrected for Cold War astigmatism by liberal universalists. The biographical irreducibility of its socialist commitment repels any retrospective application of the Truman doctrine and Marshall plan to its continued participation in the cultural legacy of divided Europe. However, the socialist genealogy of Wolf's writing does not supply the only context for grasping its referential significance. Of equal importance today are the vicissitudes of her work's cosmopolitan fate across and after system divisions and military bloc politics. The Czech critic Michaela Jacobsenová has noted the special position the GDR occupied among Warsaw Pact countries. "In no other so-called socialist land besides the GDR was the idea of socialism still vital and to be taken seriously,"[6] a judgment that can be corroborated by comparing Wolf's, Heiner Müller's or Volker Braun's works with those of Czech writers like Ivan Klima or Milan Kundera, or Polish writers such as Tadeus Konwicki and Kasmir Brandys, or the Hungarian writer Gyorgy Konrad, where socialism and the state have disappeared as objects of desire and contestation. Moreover, Wolf was "the sole intellectual," according to Frank Schirrmacher, "who seemed to demonstrate the

4. Writing in 1993, Michael Stürmer, cited by Eric Hobsbawm in *The Age of Extremity* (New York: Vintage, 1994), observed: "There is a strange parallelism between East and West. In the East state doctrine insisted that humanity was the master of its destiny. However, even we believed in a less official and less extreme version of the same slogan: mankind was on the way to becoming master of its destinies. The claim to omnipotence has disappeared absolutely in the East, only relatively *chez nous* – but both sides have suffered shipwreck" (11).

5. Hermann Vinke, ed., *Akteneinsicht Christa Wolf* (Hamburg: Luchterhand, 1993) 61.

6. Michaela Jacobsenová, "Über das Richten," *Der deutsch-deutsche Literaturstreit oder "Freunde, es spricht sich schlecht mit gebundener Zunge,"* ed. Karl Deiritz & Hannes Krauss (Hamburg: Luchterhand, 1991) 113.

mental sovereignty and independence of the other German republic."[7]

Ultimately, then, Wolf is the only writer of postwar eastern Europe to achieve secure world fame because and in spite of her commitment to her state's socialist mandate. The double edge of this institutional salience in the West, where the admission of her socialism into the literary canon was balanced against the fear of comforting the wrong people, could be justified by the 1950s rubric "peaceful coexistence." Peaceful coexistence marked an ethical orientation toward geopolitics that reemerged in the 1980s cultural sphere as the arms race accelerated. The cultural ecumenism of peaceful coexistence allowed the topic of Christa Wolf to take root in the U. S. academy with various professional discourses and a growing archive of publications. Anna Kuhn's influential 1988 book about Wolf set out some of those discourses as social and socialist realism, German left national tradition, and feminism,[8] thus implicitly affiliating Wolf with a North American realist and feminist canon that includes Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson and John Steinbeck; Willa Cather, Tilley Olsen, Grace Paley and Adrienne Rich.

The dislocation of the socialist collapse in 1989, however, has disrupted the balance that structured the reception of Wolf in the 1980s, some critics taking the loss of state socialism to signal a loss of Wolf's cultural *frisson* for the United States. Such institutional revisionism represents a failure of political and aesthetic imagination. Although the loss of really existing socialism needs to be grasped as an absence, it also opens an expanded presence for Wolf's work. This work is inseparable not only from historical socialism, but now also from socialism's collapse and the intellectual disarray such an unprecedented catastrophe occasions. In a more narrowly aesthetic sense, the earnestness of her oeuvre is expanded by the black comedy – the Olympian "revaluation of all values" – that greets the devastation of a cultural landscape on that scale.

The unique position of Wolf's writing both to articulate a socialist *Fort-Da-Sein* and to catalyze a massive affective response to its disappearing act makes it emblematic of our times, their insimultaneity as well as the specific pitch of their global homogenization. The now open juxtaposition of East German secret police (Stasi) parataxis (files, lists and accounts, compiled with the autistic sovereignty of a closed system) with

7. Frank Schirrmacher, cited in Fritz-Jochen Kopka "Who's afraid of Christa Wolf," Deiritz and Krauss 156.

8. Anna Kuhn, *Christa Wolf's Utopian Vision: From Marxism to Feminism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) 1-19.

Wolf's hypotaxis (subordination, qualification, comparison, executed with solemn faith in the possibility of shared meaning) results in a scurrilous humor – not a gallows humor, but a giddy wariness of the cutting-edge of normalcy at the fin-de-siècle. In this expanded, twice-doubled world of then and now, inside and outside, description is as deceptive as intention, loyalty as treacherous as circumstances. "State treason," GDR dissident Hans Joachim Schädlich wonders in a bitter word play, "is it the betrayal by someone of the state? Or: is it the betrayal by the state of someone?"[9] Where, as here, the communal continuity of biographical testimony is so generically at odds with a disrupted official narrative, the candid, auratic gaze (Benjamin's "*aufgeschlagener*" [returned] Cassandra's "*hellseherischer*" [clairvoyant] *Blick*) with which Wolf's prose returns its readers' regard becomes a suspicious and maladroit rather than intimate and innocent gesture.[10] The 1990 press censure of Wolf's novel about Stasi surveillance, *What Remains*, for its wide-eyed invitation to discover an experience of ordinary state repression that everyone already knew exemplifies the moral turn against her. This fall from innocence is not carnal, but is in fact rigorously non-erotic in all its prose incarnations by Wolf, the Stasi, and the press, which collectively and individually presume here the stakes of what Julia Hell has called "the purified body of the victim."[11] Her fall represents the archetypical plunge of the hoped-for novel of socialist morals into the unimagined epic of liberal power – in a sense a reversion of the domesticated Troy of Wolf's best-selling *Cassandra* back into the imperial *polis* – and, as such, its hard

9. Hans Joachim Schädlich, *Vertrauen und Verrat* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1997) 45.

10. The case of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, is similar in the wrenching irony of its publication as truth and eye-witness immediacy. The personal testimony by the Mayan peasant, on the force of which she won the Nobel Peace Prize, turns out to be incompatible with scholarly narrative as published by anthropologist David Stoll in his *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Boulder: Westview, 1999). "The book that is being questioned," Menchu has responded to the press, "is a testimonial that mixes my personal testimony and the testimony of what happened in Guatemala . . . . The book that is being questioned is not my biography" (63). The complexity of Menchú's situation – facing genocide, representing subalterity, and not fitting retrospectively with the transforming role of her work as public history – is, like Wolf's situation, revealing of the terms and limits of liberal integration. In this case, the humor of state security parataxis and testimonial hypotaxis is decidedly a gallows humor. Around the same time as Stoll's book was published, files were smuggled out of the Guatemalan state security archives that kept brief biographies and photographs of individuals "disappeared" by the army. See Kate Doyle, "Death Squad Diary: looking into the secret archives of Guatemala's bureaucracy of murder," *Harper's* 298.1789 (June 1999): 50-54.

11. Julia Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997) 196.

crash hits squarely at a contemporary desire for a moral politics, crushing and stoking it at once.[12]

Since the publication by Wolf in early 1993 of documents pertaining to her "Unofficial Collaborator" (IM) status with the East German secret police in 1959, her confiding solidarity with the weak has been retrospectively re-moralized as confidential weakness in the face of power. "*Die ängstliche Margarete*" ["timid Margarete"] was the headline under which the *Spiegel*, using Wolf's Stasi moniker, upbraided her in one of the first articles following the revelations, quoting the Stasi's own reproach of her "exaggerated caution and considerable reserve" in volunteering cooperation.[13] Wolf, the "personification of GDR identity" is just too frustratingly restrained for the *Spiegel*, too considerate of her carefully circumspect self to play the role for which she has been cast, and that refusal only exacerbates the fascination. "Our most famous author Christa Wolf: I was an IM . . . but I didn't know it," shrieked the *Bild* tabloid in spite of its populist contempt for the concerns of elitist feuilletons, thus demonstrating that Wolf's symbolic power is so general as to border on the comic sublime. As a media object, Wolf insists on the novelistic, if not liberal-ethical unity of her self across the main system boundaries of the twentieth century. She wants to remain a coherent biographical story, even if she is no longer its primary narrator. Yet the contradictory demands put on the normative construction of Wolf have multiplied dizzyingly since those system boundaries have been breached. She has become chief interlocutor for the new normalcy ["*das wiedervereinigte Gemeinwesen*"] that wants to grasp whether her innermost desires could *really* be different than both its desires and the Stasi's; she has also become an imaginary defendant in countless press trials; a knowing perpetrator; a manipulating victim; and the unwitting test case for ever again associating the state apparatus with the good will.

In an interview in *Freitag*, Christoph Hein has remarked that with the

---

12. Thus Peter Bender's 1996 assessment of the history of divided Germany is titled *Episode oder Epoche* (Munich: dtv, 1996) and portrays the period conclusively as the former. This view that the entire period from the October Revolution to the fall of the Soviet Union was an episode diverging only momentarily from a universal European history is represented by many of the historians and moral philosophers (including Francis Fukayama and others influenced by Leo Strauss) included in Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinburger and M. Richard Zinman, eds., *History and the Idea of Progress* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995).

13. Vinke 24, 94.

collapse of the GDR, good intentions have been transformed wholesale into their opposites, "a person acts with a certain intention, but another ball is in play which changes the aim."[14] It is nothing new to ethical theory that continuous intentions are betrayed by discontinuous circumstances: when circumstances overtake intentions, heteronomy overtakes autonomy and intentions lose their moral validity as imperatives of the will. Nietzsche argued that morality is based on the ability of the powerful to will a homogenous history in which gratitude and vengeance are paid back in a continuous, interchangeable currency of deeds.[15] Seldom, however, has the Nietzschean genealogy of morals, in which value formations are revealed precisely in the moment of their reversal, been illustrated as clearly as in the collapse of the socialist *Musterbild* GDR. Thus, Wolf was invited with other authors of her generation to heed the Hegelian moral objective par excellence and mediate boldly between "*Geist und Macht*" [spirit and power] in the 1958 Party Congress pronouncements of chief of state Walter Ulbricht.[16] She answered the call, but this idealistic mediation has now been revalued as a collaboration between "*Geist und Macht*," since the foundational thesis of the liberal society, from Locke and Kant to Habermas and Rawls, requires that spirit and power, public and private, life and system, be kept categorically and institutionally distinct.

Fritz Raddatz, former culture editor of the *Zeit*, cites Thomas Mann against Wolf as a writer who maintained the moral integrity of his work through the moral integrity [*Lebenssittlichkeit*] of his personal character in dictatorship and democracy, as well as in war, exile, and peace. Yet there are any number of FBI, INS, and OSS documents in the archives of the U. S. secret services that demonstrate how Mann's intentions too were manipulated and shaped by the grander plans of state power.

---

14. Vinke 190. Antje Vollmer quotes Heiner Müller citing Brecht's lines as his motto: "Gladly I lied for the good aim, but the aim, that swine, betrayed me." She deplores, however, his use of it in explaining his own Stasi involvements, pointing out that Wolf is finding herself in much deeper media trouble for insisting on her biographical integrity (Vinke 193).

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966) 19.

16. "The SED demanded not only the symbiosis of *Geist* and *Macht*, literature and politics, but also of culture and economy. In this sense, Johannes R. Becher called on his literary colleagues no longer to let the massive political and economic challenges wait for their literary answer," according to Günther Rüther in Rüther, ed., *Literatur in der Diktatur. Schreiben im Nationalsozialismus und DDR-Sozialismus* (Paderborn: Schönignh, 1997) 251.

Examining Mann's files, Alexander Stephan writes that "for participants as well as retrospective observers, the line has long since eroded between a betrayal, a correctly or falsely understood patriotism, and a harmless, indeed helpfully intended statement."[17] The Frankfurt School (Herbert Marcuse, Franz Neumann, et al.) too, volunteered cooperation en bloc with the CIA-predecessor organization in preparing dossiers on fellow émigrés for assessment by state security. Such cooperation is not generally seen as belonging to the same moral-historical time as that of Cold War division. That epochal division helps explain both Stephan's discretion in judging émigré cooperation with secret services, and the outrage of liberal intellectuals such as Academy of Arts President Walter Jens over what he misinterpreted as Wolf comparing her situation with that of the émigrés.[18] In the broad public, moral grounds for such a comparison are not intellectually viable. Wolf's own reading of Mann's U. S. exile diaries is far keener than Raddatz's platitudes. She notes that when Ludwig Marcuse had defended Mann against attacks on his less than admirable political past in a 1944 *Atlantic Monthly* article, Mann responded with a less than charitable openness to reflecting on his former positions. "Thomas Mann," Marcuse writes, "doesn't need to defend his no longer supporting Admiral Tirpitz." "But," he continues cautiously, aware of Mann's status, "perhaps one could wish that he once, at the right occasion, might write unsparingly about his past – as unsparingly as all great converts have done."[19] Mann in his diaries, which Wolf then cites, remarks with annoyed, but sovereign dismissal, "disturbing and tactless article by Marcuse . . . . Stupidity." The case for relative *Lebenssittlichkeit* is, as Wolf illustrates, an open one.

While drawing distinctions between states – dynastic monarchy, constitutional democracy, one-party bureaucracy, charismatic authoritarianism – is surely appropriate, the issue I am indicating is that the terrain of moral comparison is shifting unreflectively, but brilliantly, like fool's gold under the feet of Christa Wolf. The outer signs of righteousness and cynicism, the slippery "moral intentions" of "victims" and "perpetrators,"[20] are – to allude again to Nietzsche[21] – distracting from the reconstruction of historical and ethical lineages of the contemporary German state.

17. Alexander Stephan, *Im Visier des FBI* (Suttgart: Metzler, 1995) 38.
18. Vinke 233-36.
19. The English is translated back from the German cited by Wolf, and not cited directly from the *Atlantic Monthly* article. Christa Wolf, *Hierzulande Andernorts* (Munich: Luchterhand, 1999) 40.

Hence, Walter Jens rejects comparison between the fascist displacement of émigré culture and the liberal one of GDR culture, only then to compare "red" (communist) and "brown" (fascist) states after a pro forma declaration of non-comparability. In fact, as Jens's self-contradictory disclaimer demonstrates, red-brown comparisons are the very stuff of the new moral homogeneity of the age. Erich Loest proclaims, oblivious to the desires of Inge Aicher-Scholl herself, that Wolf's moral courage as an outspoken socialist in the Cold War does not bear comparison with the Scholl siblings' White Rose legacy of resisting fascism:[22] biographical continuities prove nothing where the tango of liberalism and communism from *Volksfront* to military alliance has faded from the operative memories of Loest, Raddatz, and Jens.

But for Christa Wolf, writing socialist morality with intense intimacy in a form that epitomized the nineteenth-century bourgeois self-understanding, private biography and its irresistible obscurity will not be dismantled so easily as a public category. Her compulsively reinscribed personhood has become the human icon of the post-Cold War inversion, the Fate of the Last True New Wo/Man. She is the martyr saint in the clandestine hagiographies of the *Wende* from socialism to *Novus Ordo Seclorum*,[23] a dubious honor subject to all the traditional perfidy and passion of *furta sacra*. Defiling her living remains, but denying her victimhood the *Frankfurter Rundschau* writes that

> . . . the files, porous as they might be, are the memory of injustice. Stasi-texts document the alien composition [*Fremdschreibung*] and destruction of biographies, the infrastructure of exclusion and surveillance, the collaboration of spirit and power . . . . The testaments that State Security has written for others, also for the writers, belong to the material of our self-understanding. The right to put an end [to the debate about the files] belongs moreover to neither perpetrators nor participants, but alone to the victims of the GDR regime.[24]

In the *Rundschau*'s exuberant call to national self-understanding, Wolf – whose name is crucially left out – is not herself a biographical figure

20. "Opfer/Betroffener" [victims] and "Täter" [perpetrators] are the two broadest official categories into which Stasi files are legally divided by the Gauck Commission for the Processing of State Security Documents.

21. "We immoralists have the suspicion that the decisive value of an action lies precisely in what is unintentional in it . . . . " Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966) 32.

22. Vinke 215-29.

subject to "*Fremdschreibung*," but the icon "of representative failure" who illuminates "a historical context in which the moral norms for politically consequential behavior have been destroyed." It is this spectacular burden of state failure and national, even international renewal that is being laid at the feet of the deliciously hidden testaments of biography, counter-biography, autobiography and heterobiography.

Contravening *Zeit* editorial policy against direct personal address, Raddatz calls on Wolf and Heiner Müller to "be true to the dignity of your work. Explain yourselves. Take the sadness from me and your readers."[25] Wolf, once prized for offering melancholy solace for the failed aspirations of those struggling against the tide of history, is now called upon to buoy the self-righteous spirits of her victory-drunken critics. "The clandestine is what is so cloying," Raddatz declares about Wolf's new national obligation to expose some layer of truth behind her confused but heartfelt sense of state duty in 1959. He issues this call in complete self-forgetfulness, as though the dignity he once cherished in Wolf's work didn't always have to do with its empathy for the moral cost of "the harder, sterner life" of finding a reasonable compromise with power. It was never the Frankfurt School-legitimated alienation of negativity – subject openly to ideological hostility in communist circles – that troubled Wolf's prose, but the alienation of risking a potentially mistaken self-affirmation. Wolf's affirmation consisted all along in living with the jeopardy that has now overtaken it, "*überholen ohne nachholen*," ["overtaking without remedia-

23. The discussion of Wolf, and socialist figures in general, in terms of the Christian hagiographic tradition is extensive. Horst Domdey and Michael Rohrwasser, for example, persuasively see Cassandra as a female Christ figure rather than in any sense pagan, in "Stalinismus und die Ausklammerung der Renegatenliterature: Thesen," *Text+Kritik* 108 (Oct. 1990): 68-75. The apocalyptic revelatory tradition is less commonly invoked in discussions of real socialism, although it has a leftist pedigree in Thomas Müntzer and continued in the expressionist left. But the apocalypse of the October Revolution gradually gave way to the passion plays and "sacrificium intellectus" of the Cold War period. It seems that Catholic sacramental metaphors accord better with a socialist materialism than a Protestant accumulation mindset that sharply separates narrow worldly right from the divine good. Of course, hagiographic analogies – and invocations of the "New Wo/Man" – are likely to suggest themselves wherever a biography is characterized by great social and political polarization, whether anarchist, like Emma Goldman's, or civil feminist, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton's. See Martha Watson on activist women's autobiography, *Lives of Their Own: Rhetorical Dimensions in Autobiographies of Women Activists* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1999). See Klaus Vondung, *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland* (Munich: dtv, 1988) for a discussion of the distinct apocalyptic traditions in German culture.

24. Vinke 191.

25. Vinke 171.

tion"] as the Honeker-era slogan ran before being inverted by events.

Responding in the *taz* to Raddatz, Antje Vollmer, a former Member of Parliament for the Greens, finds not the "clandestine" cloying, but Raddatz's lack of distance to Wolf's private person. "The lack of distance, this cloying love-hate, gives the debate a highly neurotic charge."[26] Vollmer wants to short circuit the moral carrousel of Raddatz and the *Rundschau* and return to the artwork itself as the relevant measure of cultural value. The work, not the biography, is representative in art, and only seldom does it assume political proportions beyond the realm of art. "In the rare chance moments of their greatest influence," Vollmer says of Wolf in the East, and Günter Grass and Heinrich Böll in the West, "the place of their art overlapped with the space of politics." Those congruencies of political and aesthetic spaces are historically transcendent moments, but they are not necessary for the art itself to be cherished. They are moments of true *kairos*. Mostly, however, the aesthetic must go it alone and secure a place for an author who is a chronological contemporary, not a crucial component of, politics. Vollmer, unlike Raddatz and even Wolf herself, does not accord the author her own public dimension. Thus, Raddatz's apostrophe of Wolf in the *Zeit* is for Vollmer a form of "disproportion," it is a "game without limits." "It is this gesture that makes me uneasy: we can attack at any moment we please. The tendency to tolerate no side turned from the public, no secret, makes the very atmosphere totalitarian. Even someone who has never risked danger still knows how deftly others are dispatched by it."[27] The vulnerable historical author and the superhistorical work need be kept apart, if art is to play its role in culture.

Vollmer's argument is similar to Gustav Seibt's argument several years later about the Stephan Hermlin scandal. Hermlin, Karl Corino claimed in 1996,[28] had falsified his anti-fascist biography to construct himself as a moral leader in GDR literary culture. Seibt argues that if one ignores the hagiographic dimension of Hermlin as having purportedly lived a model socialist life, then one is left with his artworks themselves – the autobiographical novel *Abendlicht* in particular – to be assessed on properly aesthetic terms. In this manner, Seibt separates the author's dimension not only from Hermlin's work, but also from that of the three other cases he pointedly reviews, Nazi-compromised literary

26. Vinke 192.
27. Vinke 192.
28. Karl Corino, *"Aussen marmor, innen Gips": Die Legenden des Stephen Hermlin* (Düsseldorf: ECON, 1996).

critics Paul de Man, Hans Schwerte, and Hans Robert Jauß.

> That de Man always kept silent about his past, that the *Waffen-SS* soldier who once was Jauß later became inaccessible to him, was not only escape and apology. Totalitarian systems of violence create their own pathological normalcy, and what appears to be a little concession in a moment of action only in retrospect takes on its sinful character.[29]

"A moment's weakness / A world of woe" is how Goethe put the problem of the temporal disproportion of guilt in a rather more sexualized than politicized context. The "author's dimension" (Wolf) becomes the author's "moment" or "event" (Heidegger), detachable, singular, and discontinuous: De Man at *Le Soir*, Jauß in the Waffen-SS, Hermlin *not* in Sachsenhausen, and Wolf hidden in a Stasi "conspiratorial apartment" or boldly out on Alexanderplatz. A biography, Seibt concludes, cannot destroy an oeuvre, but "only time" can. "The history of the century teaches that time is often stronger than the continuity of a person." The question of literary survival thus becomes a question of literary genre. The hagiographic legend, according to Seibt, depends on the superhistorical imitability of the saint's life by others in the same typically recurring situation. If Hermlin's work – or Wolf's work – is to transcend the reliquary character of their no-longer model lives (and here the autobiographical irony of Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* becomes all the more poignant), then it must be grasped in a different genre than the hagiographic one, in a genre that, as with the critical work of de Man and Jauß, separates and is separable from the events comprising the life. The moments of congruence or simultaneity that do remain must be grasped, in their "sinfulness" or their exemplarity, as moments apart from biography or work, as supplementary, and for better or worse, inessential.

Vollmer's attempt, however, to remand "the author's dimension" back to the private sphere is not in any case practicable, even by herself, for Wolf's symbolic value, unlike Hermlin's, goes beyond any East German hagiographic tradition, if not as reliquary, then as "discursive node" in the media "*Gerede*" (i.e., in the on-going "*Fremdschriebung*"). To answer the omnipresent call to renewed national dialogue about representative biographies of failure, Wolf, now the undisputed author of collective failure, publishes her private correspondence with

29. Gustav Seibt, "Kann eine Biographie ein Werk zerstören?" *Merkur* 588 (Mar. 1998): 213-26, here 225.

Vollmer in which Vollmer reveals that she, like Raddatz, but clandestinely, was also apostrophizing Wolf. "Thus at the time when I was writing the *taz* article, I had the feeling that you were really threatened. So it was half a letter to you and half to a public without mercy."[30] It is perhaps only *chronos* drawing Wolf and Vollmer together from their different walks of life, art and politics, into a "remarkable understanding" with each other. Nonetheless, as public figures both are subject to the media's accelerated post-wall indifference to distinctions between private and police secrets, and between public art and personal politics. "We'll have to think seriously about how to control this unleashed tendency toward intra-social violence," Vollmer writes. "But in the meantime only those who've been on the receiving end of such campaigns have a pretty good idea about it."

On the other hand, maybe the explosive public political recriminations, these "uncovered mines from the last war," signify Wolf's truly felicitous moment of historical simultaneity, rather than November 4, 1989 on Alexanderplatz, as Vollmer had thought. Where once the GDR author aspired for her dimension to overlap in exemplary fashion with the moral interiority of the socialist *Bildungsroman*, suddenly in the last decade of the century art, politics and authorship find their proper dimensions detonated, without the benefit of anyone's reasonable intentions. The sorry felicity of this moment should not be grasped as tragedy, for as vehemently as her critics seek her purgation, Wolf resists any such catharsis as simply too grand for her. But her strict modesty is unlikely to preserve its intimate boundaries given the explosive scale of her *Fremdschreibung*.[31] Rather: the disproportion, the juxtaposition, the irony, the inversion, the multiplication, and – where the true perversity lies – the abiding faith she has in socialist biographies take on the form of epic comedy. Wolf's Quixotic insistence on writing a coherent dénouement to the socialist novel of moral development, on remaining frankly committed to the old-New *guter Mensch*, no matter how clumsy

30. Vinke 194.

31. Even if she is too circumspect to describe herself either as a victim or as tragic, Wolf does consider her generation, like that of the anti-fascist exiles and resistance fighters she admires so deeply and implicitly, tragic. "When was it, I ask myself today, that I grasped that all these role models of my early years, Bredel, Seghers, Fürnburg, Becher, Weiskopf, Kuba and all their lesser known companions, belonged to a tragic generation that was mercilessly ground between the fronts . . . ? And when did it become clear to me, that we too, my generation . . . that we too would fall under the same verdict . . . ?" (Wolf, *Hierzulande* 21).

it is in the new epic frame, is so much harsher, sadder and funnier than the nurturing intimacy the Cold War elicited from her.

To return to the North American canon, the categorization of Wolf with realists, socialists and feminists such as Dreiser, Anderson and Olsen now seems like a misplacement, one that could jeopardize Wolf's role in an international canon as being quaintly outdated for her late-century epoch. Let me suggest instead that we read Wolf in an altogether different context. The epic machinations of an underground power confronting that which strangely persists in meeting its eye describes a scenario that bespeaks kinship with Don De Lillo and Thomas Pynchon; the raw exposure and everyday dignity on which she refuses to trade are akin to Russell Banks and Toni Morrison. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon suggest "historiographic metafiction" as the most general category for a post-modern novelistic canon, and includes Wolf's *Cassandra* and *No Place on Earth* in her canon, alongside Morrison, Kurt Vonnegut and E. L. Doctorow.[32] Might not Wolf, with the proper adjustments, be successfully integrated after all into the language of the West – from Tacitus to postmodernism?

II. Third World Testimony, Second World Lies: the Lingua Franca of Shame

> The words I lost were exclusively from the class of abstractions . . . "truth," "loyalty," "love," and "betrayal" were gradually lost . . . . What could make me want to say a word like "honest" in a carefree way, and thus willingly expose myself to the torment that inevitably comes from giving false testimony?[33]

I make these comparisons between Wolf and American authors advisedly, because indeed I would not want to confuse Wolf's "marginal" position in the erstwhile Second World, and now in the underdeveloped provinces ("the five new federal states") of the First World, with the centrality of "*Standort*" [location] America.[34] Even if it rested on nothing other than the facticity of American super-power, American domestic literature sets the international tone for the confident "liberal imagination" in a way Lionel Trilling couldn't have anticipated at the beginning of the

---

32. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 23, 85, 194.

33. Wolf, *Phantoms* 153.

Cold War when he dismissed Dreiser and Anderson as crude realists of the wrong (i.e., working) class for a mature liberal American fiction and advocated an acquaintance with Tacitus as becoming our new Augustinian mission.[35] At last U.S. fiction's broad contemporary satires and painstaking regional excavations have put American "manners and morals" above the aesthetic suspicion in which prewar leftist criticism was wont to hold them. Christa Wolf's manners and morals, by real geopolitical and not just rhetorical contrast, are now subject to the most withering police-work of hermeneutic suspicion. Even sympathetic reviews of her work by such American public intellectuals as Grace Paley and Todd Gittlin, as forgiving as Trilling once was imperious, undercut her particular literary value by extracting her from German polemics on the vulgarity of real socialism to characterize her as a "pacifist feminist."[36] As the harsh reviews published outside the academic discourses with which Anna Kuhn has affiliated Wolf make clear, Wolf is inextricably a part of both the "evil empire" and the military-political distaste the American empire expressed for it.[37] Good intentions of some readers aside, she is forever bound to policing of all sorts, secret and constitutional, moral and military, aesthetic and biographical, deontic and post hoc.

Still, I risk comparing Wolf's work not only with the high center of American writing, but also with the metropolitan mimicries of an author like Salman Rushdie, in respect to both religious fatwa and satanic verses. As David Bathrick has observed in language comparable to that of Homi Bhaba's discussion of Rushdie, the "double bind of many GDR intellectuals lay very much in their inability to accept themselves as hav-

---

34. "What was once draining and dear to me as the Federal Republic, must now make sense to me as a 'location' . . . Already now priority for all socio-political activity and inactivity has to be paid tribute to with the jingle 'Standort, Standort über alles . . . '" Günter Grass, "Standorttheater," *Eigentum verpflichtet. Die Erfurter Erklärung*, eds. Daniela Dahn et al. (Heilbronn: Distel, 1997) 17. Grass, supporting the 1997 Erfurt Declaration to sustain Germany's commitment to a social welfare state, criticizes the hollowing out of constitutional consensus in the name of economic competition. Just as the nation was once naturalized by nineteenth century ideologists, so today the deracinated hegemony of G7 commercial interests is naturalized by the global rhetoric of "location" as the site of comparative advantage in investment returns.

35. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Anchor, 1950).

36. Grace Paley, "Christa Wolf," *Just as I Thought* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1998) 208-15, here 208.

37. See, for example, Stanislaw Baranczack, "What Remains, alas . . . " *The New Republic* 208 (24 May 1993): 31; and Karin McPherson, "Literatur als Schlachtfeld" in Deiritz and Krauss 121-24.

ing been criminalized. The most profound forms of public mistreatment and humiliation were viewed by many right to the very end as part of a dialogic process in which the powers that be might be brought to see the error of *their* ways."[38] In Bathrick's discussion of the relationship of Wolf to GDR state power, Wolf's inability to distinguish her own voice from "the already internalized discursive 'system'. . . within which she is both willing participant and an object of ostracism" leads her to multiply her subjectivity in a variety of narrative 'I's. These multiple identities, caught in the double bind of complicity and resistance, issue not in a simple model of inside and outside, but in a radicalized subjectivity that "provides the regenerative terrain for discursive renewal."[39] Wolf in this description sounds surprisingly similar to Rushdie. In a quirk of history, Rushdie's narrator in *Shame* imagines his interlocutors' accusations against him: "*We know you*," they charge, "*with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies*?"[40] "Forked tongue" or "*Doppelzüngler*" was the uncannily well-chosen code name of the operative files that from 1968-1989 the Stasi kept on Wolf – a suspicious subject, a liar, someone who speaks socialism and liberal humanism with an accent, charged with both authority and suspicion in the Second World and, differently, but in equal measure, also in the First World.

The subalterity of Wolf and the "Second World" she spoke for raise also Gayatri Spivak's well-known question of the subaltern's ability to speak for herself.[41] Was Wolf, as a member of the metropolitan club of writers with visas, appropriating the elusive voice of the authentic second world subaltern, voiceless in the atrophied public sphere of democratic centralism?[42] In which case is Wolf's offense against Western

38. Bathrick 234.
39. Bathrick 236.
40. Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Cape, 1983) 28.
41. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988).
42. The very conflict, the *Literaturstreit*, around Wolf's writing contributes to another similarity with testimony novels. Thus, Linda Craft in *Novels of Testimony and Resistance* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1997) writes that "the testimonial novel often becomes a field of conflict. An eyewitness who is a member of a disenfranchised community attempts to speak as an extension of, and on behalf of, that community rather than solely as an individual; however, by virtue of his or her access to the written word, that eyewitness gains status as an authorial subject possessed of the very power whose lack made the original story so compelling" (5). See also McPherson, "Literatur als Schlachtfeld" in Deiritz and Klauss, for the embattled reception of *What Remains* in the London press.

sensibilities one of sacralizing the relationship between state and native inhabitant of the GDR, when she should have been cementing the split as unsusceptible to the *tikkun olam* of a socialist evangelium? This transgression of speaking for the redeemed GDR citizen calls down a Western media-clerical censure as passionate (if not as sanctionable) as that of the "fatwa" invoked by the ideologues of the East (whether socialist or Muslim) for West-leaning "*Abtrünnigen*" [apostates].[43]

As in the case of U.S. authors, with respect to post-colonial authors the comparison with Wolf is valuable for the sake not only of similitude but also of difference. Where Spivak is "widely acknowledged as the conscience of the metropolitan politics of identity,"[44] Wolf, who for her part is widely acknowledged as a conscience of Second World identity politics, has been deprived of the institutional grounds legitimating that political identity as due a sovereign conscience in the first place. Wolf recounts repulsing the question, "are the Stasi files the guilty conscience of our nation?" with the rejoinder that "'the truth' about this time and about our lives must come from literature."[45] However, the question is not dispatched so neatly by reference to a distinct category of literature, since those Stasi files are busy co-authoring – as is the *Rundschau* and its competitors in the "*Fremdschreibung*" industry – what remains of the Second World identity. "My ideal of writing," Wolf reflects, "would be a sort of collaboration. A pen would follow life's traces as exactly as

---

43. Hell finds that the suffering body of the socialist saint "points to an absolutely central element of the SED's official discourse of antifascism: its iconography of martyrdom and redemption" (34). The post-SED discomfort with Wolf as inappropriately sacramental – as a socialist saint – echoes not only the Reformation's repudiation of local saints (especially female ones) and their cults, but the anger of conservative North American critics at the supposed sacramental power of Latin American testimonials of oppression. Hence, Dinesh D'Souza calls Rigoberta Menchú a "modern Saint Sebastian," "an ecological saint," and a "consummate victim," all deemed anti-Enlightenment roles in revolution and reform in the Third World (Craft 2). By contrast, Liberation Theology argues for an enlightened, progressive understanding of Christian martyrology. Finally, with all the denunciation of socialist martyrology, it appears that the liberal fundamentalists are bringing back Lutheran demonology [*Teufelsforschung*], a practice skewered by *Kursbuch* editor Karl Michel in "Mitarbeiter und Mitspieler" (Vinke 209). "In our case, the exorcism is not for hell's entire evil empire, just a little spot with 100,000 devils and their 200,000 helpers' helpers, and among these latter, the Stasi collaborators, it's only the poets that the culture pages are seeking out."

44. This fanciful idea of a conscience of World politics is drawn from the Columbia University English Faculty Biographies Web-site, "Professor Spivak," the 1998 site reads, "is widely acknowledged as the conscience of the metropolitan politics of identity." 13 Oct. 1998 <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/english/facbio.html>.

45. *Phantoms* 242.

possible; the hand holding it would be my hand and yet not mine."[46] Wolf's informal collaboration with the Stasi in the late 1950s – an indelible mark of her moral earnestness – unexpectedly fulfills in the 1990s that ideal to which her life's work has been devoted. It also prejudges the possibility of her active conscience and her literature in a world that after 1989 accepts only the guilt of the collaborative identity that ultimately defines the biographical subject for the Second World. Even if a GDR intellectual somehow hasn't "collaborated," nonetheless any public utterance must be prefaced by the profession of privately clean hands, as in Christoph Hein's variation on Helmut Kohl's "*Gnade des späten Geburts*" ["blessing of being born late"]: "I come from a pastor's family, so certain things were denied me by birth."[47]

In contrast to high-profile revolutionary Third World personalities, such as the Pan-American identities of Che, Castro and Rigoberta Menchú, or the Pan-Arabic ones of Nasser and Arafat, or the Pan-African ones of Lumumba, Fanon and Nkrumah, or Pan-Indian ones of Mohandas Gandhi and Phoolan Devi,[48] where the full range of identity categories from race to gender have been constituted in opposition to colonial and capitalist borders, Second World identities sought precisely to rival First World ones in finding the sanction of new legal frameworks of state and economy.[49] To be a socialist (at least for most of Wolf's generation of intellectuals, and certainly for the well-adjusted

---

46. *Phantoms* 1.

47. Vinke 189. Physicist Hans-Jürgen Fischbeck in a letter to Fritz Raddatz expresses his anger even as he must succumb to the ritual of proclaiming his purity – an ironic parody of "are you now, or have you ever been . . . :" "At the outset of my letter, I see myself as an East German compelled to the demeaning, almost ritualized assurance that I have always been against the SED regime and had nothing to do with the 'Firm', if I am to be heard at all and not put under false and destructive suspicion" (Vinke 171).

48. David Stoll in his book on Menchú, also mentions Phoolan Devi as a case of the uses and abuses of biography. "From prison, Devi smuggled out a diary that became the basis of writer Mala Sen's book *Bandit Queen*, Shekhar Kapur's rape-filled film about her life, and a successful campaign to free her. Although Devi had signed a contract agreeing to the use of her story, she went to court to prevent the film from being screened, arguing that it violated her right to privacy, distorted facts about her life, jeopardized her legal defense against murder charges, and would inflame hatred between castes" (Stoll 302).

49. Arlene Teraoka considers the complicated East German relationship to the third world "other" in *East, West, and Others* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1996). Bathrick discusses Müller's Second World play *Der Auftrag* (about Jamaica) in contrast to Peter Weiss's First World play, *Das Gesang vom Lusitanischen Popanz* (about Africa). "Müller's play could be seen as a somewhat negative answer to Weiss's more optimistic vision of socialist-Third World solidarity" (146).

Second World citizen) meant not to reject the "negativity" of oppression, but to identify oneself with the "positivity" of an alternative state and economy. Without state structures administratively bolstering the quest for a mature GDR personhood after 1990, the basis for continued identification with Second World subjectivity has collapsed. Ultimately the Second World personality itself, in all its contortions, comes across as even more suspicious than the rival Second World police, who were after all just doing their job as *advocati diaboli*, exposing the hollowness of the socialist faith. Thus, Stasi intelligence data continue to be assimilated into the metropolitan conscience of the victors, while the "*Bananamenschen*" [banana-people] and their regionally popular political party, the PDS, are demeaned as less than couth in terms of class status and liberal bona fides – the very grounds of Trilling's aesthetic *pax americana* in which the novel of middle class manners decisively displaces that of ethics or "*Gesinnung*." In order to find a mutual discursive platform, or an ideal Habermasian hearing, the "consciences" of the Second World must abruptly choose between the psycho-ethical identities of "immature" Third World objects of international policy, or the mature identities of NATO members. The hollow space of the previously state-sanctioned identity of real socialism has been filled, as Wolf foresaw and Rushdie described for the Third World migrant, by the heteronomous culture and police files that in the capitals of metropolitan judgment add up to a testimony of abject shame. In one of the most awkward chapters in the annals of "*Doppelzüngler*," Christa Wolf tries out her post-*Wende* identity in the lingua franca of the new world conscience: "Language. Gradually I can begin to reflect on the differences between English and German, at least in the limited English at my command. How much easier I could say: I am ashamed, than: *ich schäme mich* . . . ."[50]

III. Lost Commitments: the Place of Post-Real Socialism

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

50. *Hierzulande* 40-41.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! My last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

– even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster.
– Elizabeth Bishop[51]

After the disaster, catastrophe, anabasis, *Wende*, "after the demonstration" (as Helga Schubert memorably sketched the post coital moment of revolutionary fervor[52]), when so many others ("*Wendehälse*") have turned, Wolf remains unconverted. In her essayistic, diaristic, epistolary collections *Parting from Phantoms* and *Hierzulande Andernorts* she insists on grappling with the events of the last decade of the century in the intentional terms of autobiographical continuity with her socialist past. She confronts her readers and writers with a fugue of socialism's presence and absence, even where those readers want her to supply them with some clear recognition of its decisive loss, its "40 years of futility."[53] It is an autobiographical fugue: her "self" is equally at stake

51. Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art," *Contemporary American Poetry* 6th Edition, ed. A. Poulin, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996) 51.

52. Helga Schubert, "Innenhöfe," *Das verbotene Zimmer* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1984).

53. Wolfgang Thierse, a respected GDR literary critic, who became the deputy chair of the Social Democratic Party, writes "we [former citizens of the GDR] need – and is that once again GDR-nostalgia, blubbering sentimentality? – the moment of familiarity, of humanity and fraternity, as it developed in 'dark times' and 'niches', this idiosyncratic humaneness that according to Hannah Arendt 'only manifests itself in darkness' and 'in visibility dissolves like a phantom into nothingness'" in "Gegen die Abwicklung unserer Geschichte," *Die Abwicklung der DDR*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold and Frauke Meyer-Gosau (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1992) 9-13, here 10. Thierse's starting point for his famous proposal for a "tribunal" on the GDR past was a strong presumption, however nuanced, of its existential guilt. Thus, he concludes "the price for truth and justice is first destruction – the smashing of a false community, this illusory GDR-'we.'"

with the socialism with which she has identified herself. Wolf has located her selfhood in socialism, in the GDR, "diesem besseren Land." The loss of that historically particular *Heimat*, *domus*, *oikos*, is what she finds herself either confessing to or, a moment later, refusing with a touch of hysterics – though it is not the hysteria of nostalgia, but that of someone whose exculpatory testimony will never be admitted as evidence in a climate of overwhelming presumption of guilt.

As a large secondary literature on autobiography and individual ethics attests,[54] there is no settled description of a responsible subject in any of modernity's most intensely circumscribed domains from gender, law and economics to art, entertainment and education, let alone a description of a responsible – or just plain phenomenological – subject of real socialism. Such a description, moreover, is bound to be as much a matter of genre as it is of reference – for the narrative success of the socialist subject is of a piece with its historical viability as a finished or unfinished project. Here, too, a growing literature on the importance of narrative and fictive techniques for historiography[55] makes clear the challenge of the "discursive turn" even for the apparently so overdetermined "Westward turn" of the Second and Third Worlds. Finally, the passionate debates about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of such affect-laden constructions as tragedy, comedy, hagiography, romance and elegy for representing socialism's recent past[56] demonstrate that objective journalism, cool legalism, political pragmatism or psycho-social therapeutics are not especially realistic vehicles for sounding the emotional disposition of public voices toward the socialist legacy.

In any case, a reality framed by the narrow temporal horizon proper to the digital citizenry of the West is too exclusive a perspective from which to settle scores with the personal histories and economies of socialism. Even if the sudden disappearance of the Eastern bloc and end of the cold war is accepted as the dénouement of the epoch that began,

---

54. For a good starting point for the new work on autobiography, especially women's writing, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds, *Woman, Autobiography and Theory: A Reader* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998). For disagreements in ethical theory, see the survey *Liberal Democracy and its Critics: Perspectives in Contemporary Political Thought*, ed. April Carter & Geoffrey Stokes (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).

55. A starting point here would be Hayden White's reflections in *Figural Realism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999); or see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1985) for an influential book in the German debates.

56. See, for example, the Seibt mentioned above and the Rorty mentioned below.

say, with the First International, the unity of events that such a closure constructs is still open to discussion. Does it relegate them to halcyon days or a harshly primitive past? Does it preserve them as a folly to be minimized as it eternally recurs, or does it grant them the dynamic status of *energia*, an extended activity with an immanent end denied it by the *hamartia* of political hubris? Does it represent system failure or social revolution, national consolidation of Germany or the fissiparous action of global markets on state borders? Is it a caesura comparable to the imperial decay of Habsburgs, Romanovs or Ottoman Sultans, or to surrender in a war – and then is the defeat to be seen in a line with World War II's European theater or with the post-colonial conflicts of the Third World? The openness that such large questions suggest does not imply the arbitrariness or total inconclusiveness of the discussion; rather, it takes aim against arrogant (and boring) triumphalism. After a rejection of hasty conclusions, what the discussion demands, besides referential attentiveness, is a patient specification of what Habermas calls "the discourse, tools and level of generality"[57] to which we commit the socialist experience and its catastrophe. To enlist Wolf in that patient specification is not to instrumentalize her as documentary evidence or simple social reflection, but to recognize the profoundly cultural – in both the anthropological and aesthetic senses – constitution of historical socialism in the GDR. Wolf's literary output has been concerned with plumbing the depths and delineating the outer boundaries of a socialist subject. The terms of her search are, of course, as reduced and restricted as the particularity of her subject demands, but they are not so cramped as to be done justice by the thin vocabulary of a neoliberal imagination stretching to fit the part of universal arbiter.

Although characterized as the most representative East German author of subjectivity, Wolf is most interestingly subjective in a counter-intuitive way that has little to do either with the post-unification discussions on civic responsibility or with the consumer life-style mocked by cultural conservatives and leftists alike as the "nausea/of prefabricated babble Of decreed cheerfulness."[58] The subjective goal of Wolf's writing, as Barbara Kosta has remarked about Wolf's treatment of her experiences in both socialism and fascism, is to remain "typical of her time . . . Wolf's

57. *Past* 114.

58. Heiner Müller, *Hamletmaschine and Other Texts*, trans. and ed. Carl Weber (New York: PAJ, 1984) 49.

personal history functions as a mirror and a collective autobiography."[59] Wolf both inaugurates a subjective turn in GDR literature and remains true to the fundamental ethical-generic demands – typicality and mimesis – of the many forms of literary realism. Yet a straightforward generic ordering of Wolf does not begin to address the sort of provocations that her novels and personal histories raise. If, as Sidonie Smith has noted about women's autobiographical writing generally,[60] the typical is privileged over the individual, the representative over the autonomous, then Wolf's autobiography – typical of a very different type than, say, Virginia Woolf, Maxine Hong Kingston or Gräfin Marion von Dönhoff – is even less amenable than theirs to analysis and description in the social categories typical of Western "possessive individualism."[61] Instead of making the faithful political claims or policy demands proper to a reformed believer in the democratic public sphere of Western institutions, Wolf's writing continues to reflect on the socialist system in a particular vocabulary that organizes the relationship of an individual element of socialism to its (no longer) functioning whole: not only to its *Sittlichkeit* [ethical totality], but to the systemic conditions of its material reproduction.

In *Post-Fascist Fantasies* Julia Hell forsakes realist biographical criticism and its ethical categories of intentional choice and reads Wolf in terms of Freudian Oedipal narratives in order to establish what she calls "a genealogy of Wolf's mature voice."[62] Although she does consider the ideological dimension of Wolf's unconscious, Hell owes more to Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* than Jameson's *Political Unconscious*, focusing her readings on Wolf's literary influences and intertextuality, concentrating, that is, on the nominal predicament of Wolf in an anti-fascist literary tradition rather than on her institutional predicaments in a real socialist polity. She sees Wolf's Oedipal narratives as being "post-fascist" reconstructions of the protagonists' bodily fantasies and subliminal wishes with regard to familial authority. Her readings thus characterize Wolf's work in a way that recuperates, albeit productively, Frank Schirrmacher's opening attack in the 1990 *Literaturstreit*. According to Schirrmacher, Wolf "could only reflect on GDR

59. Barbara Kosta, *Recasting Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 60.

60. Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 9.

61. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

62. Hell 145; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

society, on the system, its incapacity for freedom and right, in the sentimental categories of a private relationship crisis."[63] Schirrmacher, angered at Wolf's lack of socio-political reflection, cannot see her psychologism as anything but ethically inadequate to her context, which for him must first be grasped as politically legitimate before the self can accept its interior conflicts as appropriately private. More than the later reproach of *Gesinnungsästhetik*, then, it is an irresponsible public/private conflation – characteristic, at its most domestically solipsistic, of Nazi *Heimat* apologetics – that initially bothers Schirrmacher about the terms of Wolf's writing. Hell's acceptance of this same aspect of Wolf's writing as the level at which Wolf most consistently develops the core logic of her fantasy material allows Hell an ethically uncharged space to delve into the specific dynamics of Wolf's categorical relations. These categories – voice, body, selfhood, mother, father, child, victim, perpetrator, witness – are less abstract than the objective categories of the symbolic order (the operative social terms of policy, law and economics) and more abstract and reflexive than the deictic categories of "healthy" ego activity. In other words, Wolf's – and her narrators' and protagonists' – voice and body, which might otherwise be a source for normative categories of reason, action and desire, are reflected upon as objects of a fantasy desire. With voices articulating at different moments in her work romantic desire for love, political desire for freedom, ethical desire for social justice, aesthetic desire for classical authority or romantic rebellion, Wolf's literary subject is ultimately talking to resolve the crisis of an incompletely identified ego by attempting (interminably) to identify itself with the "pure voice and purified body of the victim" (196).

That Wolf's writing in particular and GDR writing generally is best characterized by its symptomatic fantasies (a conclusion Schirrmacher and Hell agree upon) is thus a matter of ethical concern to Schirrmacher (who adjudges the writing a failure to reflect on real consequences, i.e., "*Wirklichkeitsfremd*") and a matter of ethical indifference to Hell (who is not concerned with a consequentialist universe). These opposite responses to the same phenomenon by Hell and Schirrmacher are indicative of a pair of fundamental issues. The first is a political-cultural issue of generic classification: do we want to conceptualize "post-fascist" lit-

63. Frank Schirrmacher, "Dem Druck des härteren, strengeren Lebens standhalten," in Deiritz and Krauss 127-36, here 129.

erature by isolating it from its material social references (whatever those might be) as a realm of fantasies (however textually allusive they might be)? The second is a referential issue of historical interpretation: does the participation of GDR literature in a world of once "really existing" socialist institutions and consequences still bear iteration in a contemporary world where those institutions no longer really exist?

If, on the one hand, Wolf's socialist context can be homogenized with the fascist context (red-brown parallels) under Schirrmacher's rubric "authoritarian" or Hannah Arendt's more specific rubric "totalitarian," then her writing can easily be rejected as flawed in toto, even before any close, intertextual reading like Hell's. As Arendt observed about Eichmann's dutiful attempts to act in such as a way that his action could become law, legality fails as a basis of autonomy when the social system itself has become so perverted as to condone genocide.[64] Given the precedent of Eichmann's exemplary conduct, oblivious to the consequences of his good behavior in the Third Reich, Arendt is compelled to reject any non-consequentialist, subject-based ethics as a compass for ethical behavior. Wolf's subjective authenticity in this light seems either naïve or irresponsible, since it does not, in the republican fashion of Arendt or neo-Aristotelians, seek to comprehend its antecedent socius in political-ethical terms. Thus, Schirrmacher, conceiving Wolf in a realist genre and understanding parallel consequences between fascism and socialism, feels impelled to reject Wolf.

If, on the other hand, red-brown parallels are not particularly compelling, then the socialist context loses its presumptive moral affliction and the Eichmann case is not an applicable precedent. Two main options for evaluating Wolf's subjective authenticity with respect to her society open up. The socialism in which her subjectivity emerges can now either be apprehended in ethically agnostic, but system specific terms as the chief reference of its development, or be safely banished to the outside of any discussion of Wolf as inessential to her being or her work, the concern of "Hopp-Hopp Menschen," apparatchiks, or masculinized subjectivities. In this latter case, socialism's significance to Wolf is reduced to that of merely one local "discourse" among the many available in modernity.

Hell, using the term "post-fascist" to qualify the historical specificity of the psychological fantasies she sees shaping Wolf's fiction, seems to avoid postulating the reductive red/brown equivalencies implied by

64. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin, 1963) 135-37.

Schirrmacher's "authoritarian". But the concept "post-fascist" determines Wolf's state only to the extent that the GDR chronologically (and, more importantly, generationally) succeeds the Third Reich and is culturally based in the "heroic illusions" (4) of "steel-hard Bolshevik" bodies (33) struggling against the sexually "polluted" bodies (109) of the Nazi regime for the sake of sublimely "purified" bodies. Hell's position is what I have called "nominalist" (as opposed to "consequentialist" or "realist") in that – leaning above all on Claude Lefort, Slavoj Zizek, Kaja Silverman and Klaus Theweleit – it is not concerned with "extra-discursive" reference. Hell is documentarily precise, referring in detail to numerous fictional narratives, ideological slogans and critical shibboleths, but she defines her primary biographical and ideological materials as two genres of "fantasy" literature, thus assuring that they are not burdened by the same weight as would be genres and categories that purport to make reference to and have consequences for real social choices and behaviors. What Hell gains by normalizing the critical treatment of Wolf's east bloc "symptoms" with respect to that of richly symptomatic Western (and fascist) modernist authors, she loses in terms of Wolf's reference and even the reference of the term "socialism" to "the material power structures of the emerging East German State" (35).

Arguing against sociologist Sigrid Meuschel, Hell claims that Meuschel's analysis of the GDR reduces its complex society to its state, confusing the state's "project" with the "reality" of GDR society (6; 259n). Although it might seem that Hell is rejecting Meuschel's extension of the authoritarianism concept into the GDR, her interest is rather to define a space where she can play out the authoritarian or totalitarian thesis to its fullest without having to commit to the political consequences of choosing to equate left and right authoritarianism. Thus, separating "project" from "reality", Hell accepts that the GDR socialist *project* – which includes the entire "imaginary GDR" (251), both personal and ideological – is totalitarian. Following Lefort, "totalitarianism" is for Hell "a fantasy of social homogeneity," "an ideological project, a project concerning the realm of symbolic and cultural politics. It does *not* aim at an exhaustive description of the nondiscursive reality of state socialism" (6-7). Hell summarizes her study as having "helped to highlight a specific level of historical continuity between the National Socialist past and the post-fascist present, a continuity on the level of the body and the fantasies formed around it" (255). The real body, of

course, is where one would want to draw the sharpest distinctions between socialism and Nazi racist genocide. In light of Hell's conclusion, Habermas' pessimistic diagnosis of the post-unification atmosphere deserves quoting here. "The question of the 'two dictatorships,' which until recently was hotly debated among historians, has been settled for some time: from now on, one no longer needs to differentiate between them. We can almost feel happy if the regime that justified industrialized mass murder on racist grounds is at least mentioned in the same breath with Stalinism."[65]

Barbara Kosta, in considering Wolf's writing under the special case of a new feminine, post-realist autobiographic genre, uses genre classification likewise to assert the importance of Wolf apart from a supposedly bankrupt referentiality. "A shift from an interest in displays of individualism as objective testimonies of historical processes to an interest in subjective interpretations of life has lent autobiographical writing, filming and reading a new emphasis. The new focus has centered on subjective stagings of personal histories so that the borders once drawn between life and text, fact and fantasy, documentary and fiction have increasingly blurred. Self-representation is placed in the realm of self-invention."[66] This dereferentialization and emphasis on the fantastic – as affirmative as Hell's is negative – equally effaces the ethical and aesthetic difference between a hysterical fantasy of martyrdom and a historical decision to resist fascism. Whether Horst Wessel for the Nazis, Hans Beimler for the Communists, or Saint Sebastian for the Christians – the narratives of hysteria that bind these hagiographies end up being more important for understanding them than the different movements that they memorialize.[67] "Fantasy" does indeed liberate Wolf from the claustrophobic strictures of walled-in socialism and allow her reveries to cross borders into the West, where they can merge with those of Madonna, as Wolf herself fears for her Eastern colleagues when she shudders at the sight of Lev Kopelev's *To Be Preserved For Ever* "lying in the display window of a bookstore, and in the same window Madonna's sex-book."[68] Perhaps Wolf's fear of Kopelev's contamination is patriarchal-prudish, "equat[ing] women with sexuality, tediously unfolding the old paradigm of the idealized woman versus the ("bad") sexualized woman" (33). But her bad prudery is

65. Correspondence with Wolf in *Phantoms* 112.
66. Kosta 3.

surely outweighed by her fair sense of a disproportion in the gravity – the tragic *spoudaios* – of the two juxtaposed volumes.

Writing about the autobiographical form especially as it pertains to women's development of discourses of selfhood, Sidonie Smith indicates why the socialist aspect of Wolf's autobiographical writing cannot be decisively marginalized by concerns with family, gender and sexuality. "The autobiographer does not always linger entirely in the spatiotemporal locale of gender; she lingers also and elsewhere in multiple locales whose positioning shifts with the effect that the formerly peripheral becomes central, the central moves away toward the periphery as other locales assume precedence."[69] Thus, even as Wolf engages in multiple languages of the self, refusing traditionally male notions of public identity – for example, civil, police, statesman, engineer, soldier, prisoner, partisan and activist identities – the dominant discourses of socialist state identification also appeal powerfully to her sense of self-development. In this regard, Smith notes that "[in] her engagement with the fictions of the dominant discourse, the autobiographer who is a woman pushes against the boundaries of cultural patterns of verisimilitude and significance . . . . She greets, identifies with, rebels against, cannibalizes, and ultimately transforms public forms of selfhood."[70] Indeed, this description captures much of Wolf's general project of interiorizing a socialist identity. But

67. There is a general movement of historical revisionism in European scholarship concerned with "demythologizing" the anti-fascist resistance, considering it a nationalist-militarist counterpart to fascism, a sort of gang rival, rather than a movement anchored in any more fundamental, i.e., class, ethos. The most famous discussion of this revisionism is the German *Historikerstreit*, but it is not limited to the German case. In the Italian case inaugurated in the work of Renzo De Felice, it has more recently carried over into the newspapers in the debates between Fausto Bertinotti's *Il Manifesto* and the revisionist *L'Unita*. See Renzo De Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1977). The problem does not lie in any demythologization that these scholars pursue, but their new myths of politics as an essentially anti-Enlightenment form of pre-liberal tribalism, regardless whether left or right in nature. A common new construction makes it a coincidence of political loyalties (and not a matter of insight or shared experience, and least of all a matter of "class interest," a category completely repudiated by these scholars) that determined who was resistance and who was collaborator. Finally, the anti-politics of these revisions of European anti-fascist resistance is of a piece with the Latin American revisionism of David Stoll, in which it is demonstrated that it was the politics of leftist guerrillas that brought down the wrath of right-wing death squads. The echoes of the *Historikerstreit* are chilling, and the consequences at least as far-reaching.

68. *Hierzulande* 27.

69. Sidonie Smith in *Women and Autobiography* ed. Martine Brownley and Allison Kimmich (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1999) 44.

70. Smith, *Poetics* 175.

this positive, individually empowered view of female autobiography's relationship to "spatiotemporal locales" needs to be qualified by a recognition of the sorts of locale where "cannibalization" can and does happen in return. Smith's ludic vision of women writers' relationship to the public form of selfhood – echoing the evocatively subversive attributes of Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan's "pre-symbolic" realm – presupposes a libertarian order of free choice (or a harmless Brownian receptivity) in life identifications, a sort of self-centric *jouissance* to which Wolf has exhibited little inclination, committed as she has been to at least one firmly policed spatiotemporal locale.[71] Beyond the intertextual categories of narrative fiction with which Smith here conceives of "the public forms of selfhood," Wolf's engagement with the "dominant discourse" needs to be grasped through the public categories of objectivity to which Wolf has explicitly committed her self. Thus, in her examination of the life writing of women activists, Martha Watson more soberly emphasizes that "as they recall their lives, these authors... attest to readers about the importance, value, and significance of their causes and urge the readers' appreciation of their commitment. Their autobiographies also provide evidence of the impact of their ideology on their lives."[72] Whatever ludic or choric components adhere to her autobiographic writing, Wolf's political allegiances demand from her a formal commitment to the commonly recognized socialist mandate of her state. What she publicly chooses to recognize there is a difficult and not entirely subjective question: the choice is over a historically specified range of options. It is this historically jeopardized choice of commitments that becomes doubly complicated in the context of socialism's collapse.

IV. A Comedy of Raison d'État: an Emergent Self in a State of Emergency

> What is the difference between capitalism and socialism? Capitalism is the exploitation of man by man, and socialism, vice versa.[73]

Citing a passage from *What Remains*, Soviet dissident Germanist

71. For insight into Wolf's sober-minded and public-spirited inclination it is illuminating to read her correspondence with the altogether more ludic, free-spirited and self-centric Brigitte Reimann in *Sei Gegrüßt und Lebe* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1993).

72. Martha Watson, *Lives* 3.

73. Ileana Rodríguez, *Women, Guerrillas, and Love: Understanding War in Central America* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996) xiii.

Efim Etkind writes to Christa Wolf in 1992 about being "so very moved by what you write about the 'self:'"

> I myself. Who was that? Which of the multiple beings from which 'myself' was composed? The one that wanted to know itself? The one that wanted to protect itself?[74]

Responding to Etkind, Wolf takes this central idea of her oeuvre, the immanent multiplicity of the emerging socialist self, to the obvious, if officially sealed, place it could not go in *What Remains*, regardless of whether the novel were published in 1979 when it was written or 1989 when it in fact appeared: to a construction of the self occurring fully outside of any sincerity of will or desire. In fact, the self that was constructed by the Stasi had been excluded from Wolf's work not so much because it was classified as a state secret, but because it might subvert too sharply her rich autobiographical construction of socialist agency. So, in her November 4, 1989 address Wolf refers to her Alexanderplatz audience as a "revolutionary movement,"[75] and two year later, no less insistent about her subjective agency as a socialist, she claims that "[f]or a number of years, books had the powerful effect of actions" in the GDR.[76] These claims are central to a narrative in which her political affiliations might be conceived as compassionate and reasonable, good and right – i.e., to co-constitute an emerging socialist *Sittlichkeit* to which one could, as to the working class of socialism's heroic age, give one's undivided allegiance. The now-open Stasi records, however, compel Wolf to addres the conceptual legitimacy of the once concealed version of her self that the state police had sought to establish. Thus, she describes to Etkind sitting in the Stasi complex in Lichtenberg reading her secret police files. At first, she feels satisfied that these GDR authorities did not see her as merely the "state poet" FRG critics have seen her as, but as potentially harmful to the state. This potent self, although a Stasi construction, she is retrospectively willing to recognize as one possible self-identification – at least, until a sense of humiliation takes over when she realizes the net depotentialization of her subjectivity. "What depresses me so when I read all this?" she asks Etkind. "I believe I object on quasi artistic

74. Wolf, *Phantoms* 157.

75. Wolf, *Phantoms* 72. By contrast, Peter Alter, a liberal conservative scholar of nationalism, has referred to the mass gatherings of November 1989 as the "symbolic funeral of the 'socialist German nation,'" *Nationalism* (London: Arnold, 1989) 97.

76. Wolf, *Phantoms* 18.

grounds: I feel insulted as a person by having been reduced to this yes-or-no question: Is she or isn't she an enemy of the state? It hurts me to have our life so trivialized, made so banal . . . ."[77]

The choric *jouissance* that Wolf would like to be able to follow (i.e., her primarily "artistic" and socialistically developing self that emerges in proportion to the state's withering away) here comes crashing against the implications of real socialist commitments that entail her acceptance of the GDR as the historically given vehicle for realizing socialism. One needs to ask carefully in what measure the relevant "discourse, tools and level of generality" are, in Wolf's narrativization of the Stasi, given by aesthetics, ethics and *Realpolitik*. On the one hand, the Stasi's cold assessments discount the poetic pathos of Wolf's own self assessments, arriving at a multiple of the self that Wolf had not hitherto felt bound by an ethics of sincerity to consider: the self that makes binding decisions at the systemic level of policy, police or law. This real-political Stasi-self is posited externally to and exclusive of Wolf's literary framework, negating precisely the topic of Wolf's literary commitment: to secure a place ["*dicht machen*"] from which she can examine the subjective consequences of being socialist in the GDR. Wolf's socialist self assessment – a secular rendering of an Augustinian, Loyolan or Pietist assessment of God's intentions[78] – requires a patient negation of all merely accidental desires and exigencies, especially those of a potentially porous border, a border that relentlessly makes every GDR life seem accidental in comparison with those of its overwhelming neighbor. The Stasi's short timeframe, dictated by a fragile raison d'état, cannot comprehend Wolf's all-important distinction between accidental and essential belonging to the GDR: where Wolf is concerned with the emergence of the socialist subject, the Stasi is concerned solely with its emergency.[79]

---

77. Wolf, *Phantoms* 160.

78. In *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976) Roland Barthes discusses the Ignatian "balance sheet" as a "virtuality of possibles which one works to make equal in weight, as though one were to construct an extremely sensitive scale" in order to follow what matters to God (73). Kosta contests a reading of Wolf's autobiographic writing as pietistic in character, "unlike traditional confessional writing, which peaked in the 18th century with the Pietists who produced minute, fastidious entries to serve as seismographs of spiritual stirrings, the authors of contemporary experiential literature were engaged in direct dialogue with others" (47). It is interesting, however, that Kosta's spiritual seismograph (or some such meter) metaphor is one of Wolf's favorites. Thus in an homage to Heinrich Böll on the 80 anniversary of his birth, she praises his "*seismographischer Empfindlichkeit*" [seismographic sensitivity] (*Hierzulande* 176).

On the other hand, as the events of the late 1980s demonstrated – although the suspicion had long saturated every serious East German narrative – socialism in twentieth-century Germany could not survive without the GDR's militarily assured borders, borders whose starkness, in turn, police and party organizations vainly sought to reintegrate into an autarkic *communitas*. If the Stasi panopticon could only comprehend Wolf's subjectivity as "accidental" to its survival – surveying whether at each isolated moment of observation she was for or against the state – the security police were not, conversely, accidental to Wolf's identity. Thus, the desire that the protagonist of *What Remains* expresses to mother the agents who are watching her apartment has to be seen not only as Wolf's artistic misrecognition of her own criminalization in the GDR,[80] but also as a fundamental recognition: that the most basic claim constituting the particularity of her narrative identity is for the real existence of a *communitas* whose agents – paradoxically – could credibly insist on the communal significance of its essentially military borders. Western representatives likewise insisted on the necessity of Cold War arrangements for guaranteeing the "American" or "democratic" way of life. But, from the erection in 1961 of the "anti-fascist protective wall" to its breaching in 1989, the empirical difference between East and West in the relative importance of military borders to state survival is obvious. While a sincere socialist subject could (as an always self-defeating Stasi could not) involute the state's security perimeters into non-political domestic and aesthetic spaces, creating out of the mythos of the revolutionary "moment" a spatiotemporal *duré* in which to articulate an affirmative subjective dimension, this articulation could only finitely defer its implication in the police pragmatics of the Cold War. As much as Wolf sought a socialism "contained in the smallest things, but not contained by the largest" (St. Augustine), the hard conditions of its tenuous borders remained inescapably the conditions of her narratives.

---

79. Linda Craft has observed that "the testimonial novel is compelling because it is a literature of emergency" (26). In the sense of the Central American testimonial novels that Craft is immediately referring to, Wolf's oeuvre only gradually became concerned with testifying to the socialist subject as an emergency subject rather than an emergent one. The turning point came when, with the 1989 collapse, the Stasi construction of the emergency subject became the unavoidable one for all GDR writers to "come to terms with." In the revolutionary, guerrilla or resistance novel per se, because the moment is by definition an emergency one, the testimonial form can be more strictly defined than in the case of the more historical-autobiographical forms of the GDR novel.

80. Bathrick 234.

One particularly sharp irony of the literary retrenchment occasioned by the decommissioned police files[81] and their public subversion of Wolf's highly intimate "subjective authenticity," is how similar it is to the retrenchment that a liberal universalist like Jürgen Habermas fosters when he, likewise, though far more humanely, solicits from Wolf a commitment to the objective self of the Federal German state. In a November 1991 letter, Habermas seeks to persuade Wolf, now a fellow Federal German, to accept political terms that are not based in her, after all, no longer pertinent "subjective authenticity," but in universal reflections rooted in his specific system. "This westward orientation," he claims of his system, "did not imply a warping of the German psyche but rather the practice of independence."[82] He feels that one must affirm the legally instituted grounds of existing Western democracy as the only and best supports of the project of liberal and distributive justice, historically the most progressive forms of Enlightenment universalism. Wolf, wary of inflated claims to universalism embodied in a West German experience of intellectual freedom, responds with a Diltheyan hermeneutic skepticism that "[f]or us intellectuals, I think that talking about history means talking of our own life histories, our personal biographies" (119). It is on that experiential level that Wolf cannot accept the terms in which Habermas distinguishes, to the detriment of the East, between the degree of systemic "bias" in the intellectual biographies of the East and West.

Yet the important issue here is not a lay recapitulation of the famous Gadamer/Habermas debate over the value of historical hermeneutics versus universal critical norms. Rather, the issue is again based in a generic determination, though not among literary genres, but between literature and philosophical scholarship. Both Wolf and Habermas in their exchange of letters insist on "more than the usual amount of sensitivity in the way we deal with each other" (118). However, such historical "sensitivity" alone answers to little in a debate whose topical levels, though each specific, are disparate. To begin with, Wolf in her response fails to read Habermas' phrase "Western orientation" as a metonym for universalism

---

81. A legal distinction is important here for clarity. The Gauck commission has only made "perpetrator" files available for legitimate public access. Thus, Wolf's "Margarete" files are fully media accessible. Her much larger "*Doppelzüngler*" (i.e., victim files) have only been made accessible to her and her husband. Wolf, however, has selectively allowed parts of these files to be published, including some documents referred to in her letter to Etkind (Vinke 265-90).

82. Correspondence with Wolf in *Phantoms* 116.

per se. Thus, she answers to his celebration of "the West" – just one compass point among others in her understanding – by heralding the Russian writers she, but not he, has known in "the East" (121). Wolf's misreading, if that is what it is, of Habermas' rhetoric points out what he neglects to say only explicitly: that the relevant future for Germany and relevant vantage for understanding its past is "the West," all other points are contingent experiences, not "spontaneous" "independence." But if Wolf does not appreciate Habermas' metonymic geography, he, focusing on catalogues of his philosopher heroes, apparently does not appreciate the difference between philosophical and literary reference in general. Alluding to her "writer colleagues," she reminds him that "they are the people we are talking about, aren't they, along with other artists, not the philosophers and social scientists on both sides" (122). At stake in her reminder is not a repudiation of universalism, nor a formalist division between philosophical and literary language, but the very possibility of the real socialist experience, however else one might want to qualify it, embodying a "valid" subjective attitude toward the universal. Habermas has ruled out this possibility a priori, limiting his "sensitivity" for experience in the East to the concession of one particular sort of Western ignorance. "We in the West in fact have not lived under Stalinism, nor do we know anything about the complex circumstances of life in a post-Stalinist society" (118). More historically and ethically attuned than Julia Hell's "post-fascism," Habermas's "post-Stalinism" nonetheless consigns Wolf's experiential reference to a world of fatally truncated meaning.

Of course, things might have come out differently in a counter-factual universe had Wolf's family made it west past the Elbe and Habermas's found itself to the east of the river. "If I insist on drawing distinctions about this matter," he reassures Wolf, "it is by no means because I want to claim any *merit* for one side . . . if by chance I had not grown up in the Rhineland but had found myself in 1945 living east of the Elbe instead, I would have identified with the antifascism of the returning Communists and would have become a Party member" (115). The problem with Habermas's chivalrous gesture to Wolf is that it backfires on her when she later tries it herself in a television interview after the 1993 Stasi collaboration scandal breaks. For without her merit – or guilt – in struggling for socialism, what is left for her to stand on? Unlike Habermas, she has lost her real institutional platform. In the historians debates of the 1980s, Habermas made clear his discomfort with the casual practice of

"counter-factual history," which generally made Hitler's rise contingent on the Russian Revolution (Nolte). It is thus no doubt more a rhetorical gesture than a considered approach to Cold War biography when he engages in it with Wolf. Nonetheless, the "there but for the grace of God" formula has become one of the most common tropes of post-unification reconciliation, and is far from ideologically neutral in its implications.[83] It is a gesture of magnanimity on the part of the victor (one that would not be offered by civil rights dissidents like Bärbel Bohley or former-prisoners like Erich Loest), a concession of defeat by the loser (one that could not be offered by returning Communist exiles like Friedrich Wolf or Anna Seghers), and, in this case, it marks not only a factual, but also an ethical defeat for socialism. For while it is kind when a victor disclaims merit, it is a harsh peace when a loser must surrender the attribution of deep significance to the sacrifices of the struggle. Thus, one acutely senses the fragility of Wolf's socialist mythos when Günter Gaus, in his interview about her Stasi collaborator files, offers her the reversed role scenario as a way of relativizing her culpability for (and hence commitment to) the GDR. "You know everything was very much a matter of chance," she says, accepting Gaus' premise of the accident of birth. "We were refugees when we left Landsberg/Warthe . . . . Of course, we wanted to make a mad dash across the Elbe, we really wanted to get to the Americans. In two more days we would have crossed the Elbe, and my life would have been completely different. But instead it has turned out this way. The fates of Germans depended on where we happened to be" (250). From the guilt of having compromised her *Geist* with the military *Macht* of the "*Schild und Schwert der Partei*" ["Shield and Sword of the Communist Party"], Wolf here moves her position to the liberal legalism of having settled, like all law-abiding Germans, for the negotiated positions of the 1943 Yalta Treaty. With this move her

83. The rapid rise of "counter factual history" has coincided with the end of the Cold War, a leading proponent being Niall Furgeson (*The Pity of War*), whose prominent Tory ideology might or might not be linked to the genre's practice. Without overdrawing any necessarily conservative component to counterfactual history, one can link its growing frequency with the relaxation of the subjective obligations that came with Cold War partisanship, which emphasized historical inevitabilities and the commitments that were derived from historical laws of progress. "In general," Lutz Niethammer comments on the "Zeitgeist," "the focus on posthistory or *Posthistoire*, with its arbitrary simulation of fragments of the past, belongs to an 'as if' aesthetic, a game with signs which, though quoted out of context and no longer 'in force,' still seem to retain their power of attraction." *Posthistoire*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1992) 1.

"subjective authenticity" shifts from weighty, sad and guilty, to casual, affectless and unburdened; her Oedipal conflicts, as Hell might observe with a sigh of relief, are hereby given notice.

If the existence, somewhere among Wolf's multiplicity of selves, of a Stasi-self, i.e., a militantly state-identified self, is considered not something that compromises her autonomy but something that guarantees its historical difference, then the severest "compromise" of her selfhood is the sensational exposure of the Stasi-self after the Wall and not its existence before it. The narrative in this case becomes not that of a multiplicity of voices being silenced into one by Stasi extortion, but a story about the fragmentation of an active position into its exhausted components, the loss of political solidarity in favor of the detachment and multiplicity (duplicity) of identity, the loss of historical difference in favor of the predominant sameness of atomic consumer satiation.

In her analysis of Central American guerrilla autobiographies and novels, Ileana Rodríguez casts into sharp relief the similar sort of moment (the "liberal moment") when the revolutionary Nicaraguan Sandinista identity loses its narrative gravity.

> For more than seven years the Sandinistas had refused to talk to the contra leaders . . . However, at the end of the decade of the 1980s, the Sandinistas came to admit that unless they wanted to give up their project they had to sit down with the contras and talk . . . In Zapoa, what had been bloody opposition became quasi-amicable dialogue . . . The boundary once dividing the state from its opposition blurred. The constituting notion of the opposition itself, invoking the presence of alternative notions of state and nation, fogged.[84]

While it would be unacceptably smug simply to dismiss such liberal moments of negotiation as tragic defeats of heroic subjectivities rather than gains of common dialogue and mutual understanding – even advances toward the Habermasian "ideal speech situation" and the "uncoerced coercion of the better argument" – the empirical assessment of the real political terms of conversation has been impatiently brushed aside in the name of the new moderation of a victorious status quo.[85] Thus, Richard Rorty in "The End of Leninism and History as Comic Frame" argues that in the aftermath of the collapse of the Eastern bloc the political left has no reasonable alternative but to disarm

84. Rodríguez 3-4.

philosophically before proffering any vision of society or justice.[86] Like Karl Heinz Bohrer, who seeks "to determine aesthetic phenomena without metaphysical references,"[87] Rorty seeks a politics whose commitments are equally free of "metaphysical reference." A politics of pragmatic deixis (the word comes from the Greek word for pointing, like the index finger) accepts that doing the right thing is limited to deciding one's commitments among the little bits and pieces of reality that are immediately given to our perceptions. The big existential questions beyond "this" and "that" are all Stalin (in Sartre's case, according to Rorty) or Hitler (in Heidegger's case, also according to Rorty). The potential of large commitments, he believes, is always (that is, throughout the historical record as we have it) only a potential for wrong. He thus embraces as implicitly right precisely the "post-Leninist" banalization of conversation that Wolf's concessions under duress represent. "I think the time has come to drop the terms 'capitalism' and 'socialism' from the political vocabulary of the left . . . More generally, I hope that we can banalize the entire vocabulary of leftist political deliberation."[88]

Rorty goes on to cite approvingly Kenneth Burke's claim that "the gauging of the 'right historical moment' is a matter of *taste*," and to conclude that the "comic frame" is the only tasteful perspective for viewing "the cycle of events since the Russian Revolution". That these events and continuities, biographies and episodes fit into some obvious comic frame is hard to accept, a doubt that underlies the most banal and apt critique of Rorty's frame: it's not funny, it's not ruefully wise or wryly mordant. It's simply not a comic, but an empty frame. A "comic frame" in the fiercer, funnier and more rueful terms appropriate to tragic autobiographies with banal press denouéments is something that can only emerge – as with Wolf, Müller and Hermlin, or Roqué Dalton, Omar Cabezas and Rigoberta Menchú – in situ. The problem with Rorty's analysis, like those of Habermas and Hell, is not that its banality has no

85. For a response to the international reporting of the end of the Nicaraguan revolution see the article I co-wrote with Lee Medovoi and Shankar Raman, "Can the Subaltern Vote?" *Socialist Review* 20. 3 (1990): 133-49, in which we analyze the overwhelming odds against Sandinista victory in terms that were negotiated under severe duress.

86. Richard Rorty, "The End of Leninism and History as Comic Frame," *History and the Idea of Progress*, ed. Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger and M. Richard Zinman (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995) 211-26.

87. Karl Heinz Bohrer, "Die Ästhetik am Ausgang ihrer Unmündigkeit," *Merkur* 500 (1990).

88. Rorty 212.

"right historical moment" – no *kairos*, as Vollmer vainly sought for Wolf on Alexanderplatz – it is that it has no appreciation for the detailed reference (metaphysical and empirical) and affect (nostalgic and "hard-bitten") of socialism's long, difficult chronos.

In *History Between Kairos and Catastrophe*, Harro Müller defends the historical novel against the imputation that "the entire genre lags behind the postulate of aesthetic autonomy because it must use aesthetic external – referential – material, and aims to have aesthetic external – practical, political – effects on readers."[89] He distinguishes two generic poles for the historical novel, the genre under which Linda Hutcheon, for example, would canonize Wolf, and the one whose referential component – whether applied to forms like autobiography or testimony or forms like *Bildungsroman* or epic romance – most broadly captures the force of the best East German novels. One pole, the traditional one since the eighteenth-century emergence of the form, is typified by the "dominance of personal-individual impulses in history over systematic processes . . . . " The other, the one that has emerged in the course of the twentieth century, is characterized conversely by the "dominance of systemic processes over individual-subjective impulses in history . . . . "[90] Because the genre Müller describes so relies on the referential aspect of language, it is not surprising that the changing character of historical conflict – Cold War, insurgency, counter-insurgency, "low intensity war," ethnic cleansing, urban riot – affects characteristics of the genre at least as much as do the properly aesthetic developments collected under the catch-all rubrics modernism and postmodernism. Just as the Stasi involuted the borders of the Cold War, so too guerrilla war involutes the boundaries of neocolonialism, bringing the ironic discrepancy between the impossible autonomous subject (with its rich deictic references) and the impossible systemic conditions (with their great metaphysical weight) into the martyr's shrine of literary subjectivity itself.

Eulogizing GDR author and friend Franz Fühmann, a martyr of "the experience of futility,"[91] Wolf reflects on the especially urgent mixture of agency and objectification, measure and chaos, horizon and whole constituting a society so ideologically high-strung and militarily cordoned that its initiative became fatally lamed in endlessly compounded

89. Harro Müller, *Geschichte zwischen Kairos und Katastrophe* (Frankfurt/Main: Athenäum, 1988) 11.

90. Harro Müller 17.

91. Wolf, *Hierzulande* 64.

paradox ("stalled contradictions," in Fühmann's well-known phrase[92]).

> What mattered, we knew, was the preservation of "dignity" even in a lost cause, the struggle for self-assertion, learning to live without perspective and visible alternatives; we knew that we wouldn't get out unchallenged from the dilemma in which we were stuck, but maybe it wasn't a matter of remaining unchallenged, maybe we had to just make do not only with heteronomous standards, but even with our own ones, ones we often had to discover anew every day because it is characteristic of self-destructive relationships that those people who always wanted to live up to their own standards never could shake the feeling that they could no longer do anything "right." But maybe it wasn't even a matter of "right" or "wrong;" maybe it was about not leaving a place, and even if it was a place backed up against a wall, and even if we nonetheless defended it, as imperfectly, mistakenly, and with as many gnawing doubts and self-deceptions as we did: So we spoke... : Here, on the spot of the deepest pain, on the spot that most fundamentally put us into question, was the material of our life.[93]

Kant famously commented that all things have their price, only the individual human and the universal law underlying human right have dignity.[94] The idea of an implicit dignity radiating from the universal essence of the individual has been contested in the very emergence of twnetieth-century conflicts and the new genres and categories describing and shaping them. In re-committing herself and Fühmann to their conflicted places and times, Wolf understands that between Rorty's commitments to what happens to be "this" present moment and the systemic disequilibria whose rough waters inspire the commitment to come back to "that" place called home – between "this" and "that" – lies not a dignity irradiating us like the lighthouse at Alexandria, but a struggle to create a dignity that will never last. It does not do justice to Wolf and the legacy of the real socialism to which she committed herself (and was committed) to dissolve it in the abstraction of autonomy versus heteronomy, or nominalism versus consequentialism. Nor is the value of her legacy to be settled by genre frames, as rich as tragi-comedy and as impoverished as sexual fantasy have been on the twentieth-century's battlefields. An abstract struggle, like language, is always

92. Franz Fühmann, *Saiäns-fiktschen* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1990) 6.
93. Wolf, *Hierzulande* 66.
94. Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996) 43.

both and neither: between references and affects, quantities and qualities, call and response. Precisely what is forceful – and undecidable – in Wolf's particular struggle is that its site was finally, but inescapably, unfigural, literally a choice of affirming or not an ontological project within a militarized border. If it can be debated whether the borders established hastily at Yalta and Potsdam corresponded to a "true" or "false" epochal divide, it cannot be debated that Wolf's work represents with exactitude one local choice whose terms bear considerable relevance for you and me.