

Author Christa Wolf Reflects on the Debate about East German Literature (September 27, 1993)

Abstract

In the following excerpt, author Christa Wolf describes a public reading she gave from letters written during her California exile; she then recounts the question and answer session that followed. The ensuing discussion addressed the dilemma of Stasi collaboration – something that Western literary critics accused her of – as well as the issue of Stasi repression, which Wolf had experienced in attempting to criticize the failures of GDR socialism.

Source

Monday, September 27, 1993

Berlin Pankow

[...]

Before eight to the Stauden Gallery [in Potsdam], which already existed when we would come here to see my father, and which has now been taken over by younger people. A long, narrow room with paintings of Mecklenburg landscapes on the walls; two hundred and fifty people have come. I have doubts about whether a discussion will be possible here, which, of course, is what is important to me. Vinke and I must walk up onto a podium; I am naturally seized by doubts again as to whether I should have been willing to involve myself in this undertaking. What am I doing here? I think to myself. Isn't that simply pure presumption again? We must speak loudly into the microphone in order to be understood in the back. The topic is the volume *Inspection of Christa Wolf's Files* that Hermann Vinke edited. Alternately he and I familiarize the audience with the contents; I read from the letters that I wrote in Santa Monica and that are printed in the book. It has only been six or seven months; I still remember everything. It engraved itself upon my mind, and yet that is a completed phase; I sense that even now I can no longer convey my emotions of that time to the audience. Or is it the distance I feel, a shield, unconsciously erected against a new deluge of uncontrollable feelings?

The discussion begins somewhat awkwardly. A man asks me if the sentence in *Cassandra* – that she is ashamed of having once thought: I just want the same thing that you do! – also applies to me. I can confirm that and I talk about how, in the campaign against *Divided Heaven*, I at first always said: But I just want the same thing that you do! and how I had to learn, rather difficultly, that that was not true.

Somebody asks me to describe my development since being permitted to inspect the records, especially my Interior Minister records. I try to talk as openly as possible about the different stages, about the initial shock, the horror about myself, the despair about the impossibility of being able to expect a differentiation in public amid the general state security hysteria, about the danger of identifying myself with the characterization that I then experienced in public, about the therapy through writing and the gradual process of working my way out of the depression again until I reach my current state, where I believe that I can explain that episode – which will always remain a sore, even a dark point – on the basis of my development. While I am talking, I notice that I have taken too much upon myself after all, that I really am still too thin-skinned for that sort of forum, but now it can no longer be avoided.

An older woman spends a long time describing what she got from my books before the collapse of the

German Democratic Republic; through them she became especially aware of the fact that we live in a male-dominated society; this whole matter of the records did not interest her at all; would I continue to write about women's themes. I say that I have retained my knowledge and insights, that there are structures that were basic to the East German system, just as they are also basic to that of the Federal Republic. Both were or are patriarchies; both were or are industrial societies – that will remain in the background of my writing, even when I do not treat feminist themes in the narrower sense.

One man refers to the appeal “For Our Country.”^[1] He has read one of my letters thoroughly. I explain there, he says, that in *Cassandra* I had described that Troy had to fall because it demanded human sacrifices; then, however, in the appeal “Für unser Land” I had apparently demanded the preservation of this country of the German Democratic Republic. Was that not a contradiction? I was rather glad to be able to clarify that. In that appeal, after all, we had not been thinking about the old German Democratic Republic, about its preservation or even about its resurrection. For a very short historical moment we had thought about a completely different country that none of us will ever see. An illusion, and I already knew it was at that time. In spite of that, I participated in the appeal so that I would later not have to reproach myself for having missed an opportunity. For a moment I again feel the atmosphere of those months four years ago, into which I can otherwise hardly place myself anymore.

Suddenly the topic then changes to the state security police problem after all. Whether it is important to bring it up again and again and to grapple with it. There are different opinions; I sense an aversion to the topic, and in that context I try to control myself sharply because I am not impartial. So I say, when the keyword *reconciliation* has been uttered, that there can be no reconciliation without knowing the facts, and even while I am saying it, I ask myself if I really think that or if I have only read it. This is one of a growing number of topics, by the way, about which I have no firm opinion. I would like to hear whether or not the people actually want a discussion of their past at all (but can one really “want” it if it is embarrassing and painful, or is it one of the typical German Protestant austerities to assume that after confession of guilt and remorse, forgiveness and catharsis will follow? – Until now it has always gone otherwise in history). Some say that they did want to think about the past, they just did not want the discussion to take place in *this* fashion: conducted by the West without sensitivity and differentiation; the practices of the Gauck Commission in my case are brought up as evidence for the fact that the state security police files are being used as instruments. I attempt to argue against it by saying that we actually have to get to the point of answering for our own lives, regardless of how difficult others make it for us, regardless of how much guiltier others are, but I know that those are unreasonable demands that have nothing to do with the lives of most people. As the discussion goes back and forth, I get the impression that they are again waiting for aphorisms from me about how things are supposed to go from here. I understand every sentiment and opposing sentiment from the audience; it is as if I had never been away, it is as if they had experienced during that time the same process that I did; and now I have to guard against an attitude of expectation to which I do not want to respond; I protest (what a beautiful word!) against any manifestation of nostalgia for the German Democratic Republic that permits one to beautify what one has said and done or, for the most part, not done during the recent decades, identify situations in which we (I say “we” and mean a small group of friends) really were quite alone, until the time when the manifestations of the state's disintegration became more and more apparent, the dangers were reduced, and more and more people came into conflict and finally into opposition. That was the normal course of events and nobody could reproach anyone for it, I least of all, but neither would I forget how despondent I sometimes was during the last years of the German Democratic Republic. Nor would they be any more likely to bring me to the point of sanctioning the manner and the haste with which everything that smelled like the German Democratic Republic and was therefore disreputable was dealt with. And while I say that, I see us with the eyes of those outside: inhabitants of a quarantined barrack, infected with the state security police virus. For the first time I believe I really understand what advantages that view brings, psychological advantages, for one must not become involved with these infected people. It is self-protection when you do not let them get close to you, and it is obvious that you

can dispose of them at will. Then it dawns on me what harm this kind of “appraisal” causes, causes for both sides, and I hear myself saying, more forcefully than I want to, but even for that, for humiliation and settling things, it takes two. Why did we not resist (but how? the opposing voice in me asks)? Why did the people from Bischofferode walk through the country and nobody go with them? (It is clear to me, and the next day I can read it. Those are the sentences that they quote in the newspapers everywhere.)

Somebody asks the beautiful question of whether or not the state security police records are the guilty conscience of the nation. I say: No, only in Germany could one arrive at the idea that records could take the place of conscience. After I read my records, I knew that those records do not contain “the truth,” neither about the one for whose perusal they were assembled, nor about those who filled them with their reports. They contain what the state security people saw or were supposed to, had to, were permitted to see. They reflect a growing paranoia of the smallest intellects; the very language that they used was not adequate to record “truth,” their very formulation reduces people to objects that they made use of. A few pieces of information can be drawn from them, frequently pieces of outdated information even about the informants, to whom the records grant no development and whom they now nail down on a point that they have perhaps overcome (which is why the decoding of the cover names of the many Interior Ministry informers who surrounded us in earlier periods did not interest us). I am quite happy that I can say that candidly, since, of course, I had my own Interior Ministry records published. I say: No, literature must probably present “the truth” about that time and about our lives.

They naturally pinned me down on that point: Just where is this literature? And why, a curly-haired young woman asks, haven’t I spoken again publicly for a long time now? Somebody wanted to know what my removal to America stood for, if that was an escape. I insist upon my right to speak when I want to, and also to remain silent. I refuse to accept the advocate role that they again want to give me, appreciate the fact that they are partially right, but give examples of what I and others have said and written anyway, without anyone noticing, remind them, as I always do on such occasions, how many years after the Napoleonic Wars Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace*, and plead for the contemplation break that has to be granted even to writers. I do hear them say yes and sense that they silently stick to their demands; I notice physically how strong that claim has again become or perhaps always remained.

[...]

Around midnight on the deserted “pedestrian zone” in the center of Potsdam, eerily illuminated by lights on whipshaped lampposts. For a few seconds, I have an intensive déjà-vu experience. But here I have already . . . I stood here once in the same light; I heard the same words of farewell; I already exchanged the same embraces once before . . . But that is impossible. I am simply tired, sleep during most of the trip back; Gerd is also tired but stays awake by driving. We do not say much; once I say that I could not do something like that again. Gerd says: You really don’t have to. I brought along from the bookstore a book that is being discussed right now, have leafed through it, a thoroughly conceived story, I envy the woman who wrote it. When will I, or will I ever be able to write a book again about a distant invented figure; I myself am the protagonist, there is no other way, I am exposed, have exposed myself.

Before falling asleep, I read in an essay by Erwin Chargaff^[2]: “Two Kinds of Mourning,” which begins with the sentence: “A silent mourning has fallen upon the world.” That is true, I think to myself, and then I find a diary quote by Kierkegaard from the year 1849: “A single person cannot help or save an era; he can only express that it comes to an end.”

NOTES

[1] * “Für unser Land (For Our Country)”: Proclamation campaign by initiators from the citizen’s movement during the last year of the German Democratic Republic, last represented by Volker Braun, Bernd B. Löwe, Sebastian Pflugbeil, Andrée Törpe, Konrad Weiss and Christa Wolf, who put

the text into the version that became known, which was introduced by Stefan Heym in a press conference on November 28, 1989 (see: *Für unser Land – Eine Aufrufaktion im letzten Jahr der DDR*, Frankfurt/M., 1994). (G.W.) [Footnote taken from Christa Wolf, *One Day a Year*, trans. by Lowell A. Bangerter. Europa Editions: New York, 2007, p. 512.]

[2] ** Erwin Chargaff (1905-2002), Austrian biochemist; discovered two rules that helped lead to the discovery of the double helical structure of DNA. [Footnote taken from Christa Wolf, *One Day a Year*, trans. by Lowell A. Bangerter. Europa Editions: New York, 2007, p. 518.]

Source: Christa Wolf, *Ein Tag im Jahr, 1960–2000* (1st edition, 2003) Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, 2008, entry from September 27, 1993, pp. 554–62.

Translation: Christa Wolf, *One Day a Year*, trans. by Lowell A. Bangerter. Europa Editions: New York, 2007, p. 510–16, p. 518.

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