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KEIN ORT. NIRGENDS:

AN ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

1961 was an historic year for the German Democratic Republic. The erection of the Berlin Wall effectively sealed off East from West. In that same year Christa Wolf published her first work of fiction: *Moskauer Novelle*.¹ As part of an East German medical delegation visiting Moscow in 1959, Vera Brauer meets and falls in love with Pawel Koschkin, a Russian interpreter. Victims of fascism (Vera of Hitlerism, Pawel of Stalinism), the two characters discuss the future socialism will bring:

Bei allem aber wird er (der Mensch) - und das wird
seine grösste Leistung sein - kein Roboter werden, kein
perfektioniertes Ungetüm, sondern endlich: Mensch.²

Christa Wolf affirms that, in the future, socialism should become orientated towards humanism (in the general sense of the word) and serve the individual to realize himself. This is the central theme of all Christa Wolf's works.³ She, however, does not politicize literature, although political overtones may occur. Hers is a human message to fellow human beings:

1. Christa Wolf, *Moskauer Novelle* in: *Romanzeitung* 204 (Berlin, 1961), pp. 57-95.
2. *Ibid* p. 75.
3. Cf. Christa Wolf, "Lesen und Schreiben" in: *Lesen und Schreiben Neue Sammlung* (Darmstadt and Neuwied, 1980), p. 43: "Eine der wichtigsten Voraussetzungen für das Entstehen von Literatur ist aber Sehnsucht nach Selbstverwirklichung: daher der Zwang des Aufschreibens, als vielleicht einzige Möglichkeit des Autors, sich nicht zu verfehlen (...)."

Was ist das: Dieses Zu-sich-selber-Kommen des Menschen?⁴

Es ist ein grosser Gedanke, dass der Mensch nicht zur Ruhe kommt, ehe er zu sich selber gefunden hat. Die tiefe Wurzel der Übereinstimmung zwischen echter Literatur und der sozialistischen Gesellschaft sehe ich eben darin: Beide haben das Ziel, dem Menschen zu seiner Selbstverwirklichung zu verhelfen.⁵

Already in *Der Geteilte Himmel*,⁶ Rita learns how under socialist work conditions men and women can work together to make society more fit for human beings, in contrast to her lover Manfred, who wants to "escape the miserable conditions by doing scientific work for more profit and power".⁷ Schwarzbach, Wendland and Meternagel, for example, are all men with courage. Although committed to socialism, they recognise that it is not a magic formula. They refuse to obey inhuman, arbitrary production orders at the expense of their fellow workers. Thus, they stand for the humanistic quality of socialism.

In *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, it is precisely the struggle for self-realization which leads to Christa T.'s death. The cause of her death was alleged to be leukaemia. Spiritually, she died because the social conditions did not allow her to make life livable (i.e. 'human') and to become herself: "Man selbst, ganz stark man selbst werden. Schwer zu machen."⁸ Her marriage to Justus is one way of resolving her human dilemma; to design a home on her own terms away from the socialist society is another. In rhapsodic fashion she states her devotion to a feeling for life:

Leben, erleben, freies grosses Leben! O herrliches Lebensgefühl, dass du mich nie verlässt. Nichts weiter als ein Mensch sein...⁹

4. Christa Wolf takes these words from Johannes Becher, a former cultural minister of the German Democratic Republic. They serve as a motto for Christa Wolf's later work *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (Neuwied and Berlin, 1969).
5. Christa Wolf, "Selbstinterview" in: *Lesen und Schreiben Neue Sammlung*, pp. 52-53.
6. Christa Wolf, *Der Geteilte Himmel* (Berlin-Schöneberg, 1967).
7. Jack Zipes, "Christa Wolf: Moralistic as Marxist", an introduction to Christa Wolf's *Divided Heaven* trans. Joan Becker (USA, 1981), p. xxxvi.
8. Christa Wolf, *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, p. 188.
9. *Ibid* p. 46.

Born too soon, Christa T. offers hope because she knows that before long we will come to terms with our 'human' existence: "Es beginnt, was sie so schmerzhaft vermisst hatte: dass wir uns selber sehen (...)." ¹⁰

In *Selbstversuch*, ¹¹ a type of science-fiction story set in East Germany in 1992, the human problem is presented in its most extreme. A female scientist agrees to transform herself into a man for thirty days to test a special formula invented by bio-chemists. Scientifically the experiment is a resounding success. On the human level, however, the experiment fails. The female scientist discovers and sees through the strictly objective -- one could say 'inhuman' -- outlook on life of the male scientist:

Ihre kunstvoll aufgebauten Regelsysteme, Ihre heillose Arbeitswut, all Ihre Manöver, sich zu entziehen, waren nichts als der Versuch, sich vor der Entdeckung abzusichern: Dass Sie nicht lieben können und es wissen. ¹²

Apart from the scientific problem raised in *Selbstversuch*, the more relevant to my discussion is Christa Wolf's analysis of sexual rôles. Going beyond this analysis she tries to discover where love originates:

Jetzt steht uns mein Experiment bevor: der Versuch zu lieben. Der übrigens auch zu phantastischen Erfindungen führt: zur Erfindung dessen, den man lieben kann. ¹³

Love is uniquely human and, for Christa Wolf, an essential step towards self-realization. Beyond the sexual, there is a spiritual love which enables human beings to approach one another, as Vera and Pawel experience in *Moskauer Novelle*. ¹⁴

10. Ibid p. 231.

11. Christa Wolf, *Selbstversuch* in: *Unter den Linden* (Berlin and Weimar, 1974).

12. Ibid pp. 167-168.

13. Ibid p. 169.

14. Cf. Dagmar Ploetz, "Vom Vorteil, eine Frau zu sein" in: *Materialienbuch* ed. Klaus Sauer (Darmstadt and Neuwied, 1979), pp. 103-104: "Die Liebe ist das zentrale Motiv im gesamten vorliegenden Werk Christa Wolfs. Gemeint ist nicht nur die Liebe zwischen Mann und Frau. Der Begriff ist bei Christa Wolf wesentlich weiter gefasst, bezeichnet eine Haltung der Welt und den Menschen gegenüber, die eine menschliche Existenzweise erst möglich machen kann."

There are risks in that love, as Rita and Christa T. find out.

All Christa Wolf's characters feel themselves confined to narrow spaces; they are confronted with the dilemma of what is possible and what is required to gain an "herrliches Lebensgefühl". Rita must choose between following her lover to the capitalist West or abiding with the socialist system. Christa T. seeks refuge from society with her husband in a small town in the north and eventually in the isolation of her home by the lake. In *Kindheitsmuster*,¹⁵ Nelly Jordan, who grows up in the Nazi State and now finds herself living in a socialist society, is asked, like all her generation, to suppress her childhood experiences. Alienated from the past she lives with irreconcilable contradictions. Life as "widersprüchliches Kontinuum"¹⁶ begs reconciliation.

The burdens of striving for self-realization may push Christa Wolf's characters to the point of death. Rita attempts suicide before reconciling the conflict of allegiance to her lover and to the German Democratic Republic. Because Christa T. is not prepared to compromise and fit into society, her death may be regarded as a thinly veiled suicide.¹⁷ Death, however, is not a means of escape from this world but the manifestation of a tragic existence this world imposes upon individuals. Society stifles self-realization. Thus, beyond a certain point, life becomes meaningless. Because society and the individual is in the process of becoming human, the individual may perhaps never reach his human potential. Only when society prevents him from striving towards his goal (i.e. reducing humans to *objects*), must he respond by withdrawing from society to assert a free choice (i.e. humans become *subjects*):

Unmoralisch dagegen ist alles, was uns, was die Massen hindert, vom Objekt zum Subjekt der Geschichte zu werden.¹⁸

15. Christa Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster* (Darmstadt and Neuwied, 1977).
16. "Die Dimension des Autors", a conversation with Hans Kaufmann. In: *Lesen und Schreiben Neue Sammlung*, p. 86.
17. Cf. Fritz J. Raddatz, "Mein Name sei Tonio K." in: *Der Spiegel* (2/6/69). He understands *Nachdenken über Christa T.* as "Geschichte eines Selbstmords".
18. "Die Dimension des Autors" in: *Lesen und Schreiben Neue Sammlung*, p. 98.

Christa Wolf, the moralist, confronts the reader with exemplary situations involving a human conflict as Christa T. understands: "(...) denn nichts anderes ist schreiben als: Beispiele anbieten (...)." ¹⁹ For Christa Wolf, works of literature are stations along the path to an ideal human society. ²⁰ She is to articulate the difficulties the socialist society has in that quest ("Ich schreibe, suchend.") ²¹ and through writing offer solutions. ²²

One may wonder what sources Christa Wolf uses to authenticate her subject-matter. The policy of the "Bitterfelder Weg" required writers to familiarize themselves with production processes and the worker's living conditions. Accordingly Christa Wolf worked in a coach factory in 1961-1962. Her experiences inspired *Der Geteilte Himmel*. Many of Christa Wolf's characters are born around the time when she was born in 1929, ²³ which strongly suggests the intrusion of the author in her own works. ²⁴

19. Christa Wolf, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* p. 57.

20. Cf. Christa Wolf, "Lesen und Schreiben" in: *Lesen und Schreiben Neue Sammlung*, p. 47: "(...) sie (die Prosa) ist ja ein Produkt des Reife-
prozesses der Menschheit, spät entwickelt, geradezu erfunden. Differenzierung zu schaffen und auszudrücken. Prosa schafft Menschen, im doppelten Sinn. Sie baut tödliche Vereinfachungen ab, indem sie die Möglichkeit vorführt, auf menschliche Weise zu existieren."

21. Christa Wolf, "Selbstinterview" in: *Lesen und Schreiben Neue Sammlung*, p. 51.

22. Cf. Christa Wolf, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* p. 122. Christa T. claims: "(...) dass ich nur schreibend über die Dinge komme!(...)."

23. Vera was born in 1929, Christa T. in 1927 and Nelly Jordan in 1929.

24. Cf. "Die Dimension des Autors" in: *Lesen und Schreiben Neue Sammlung*, p. 75: "(...) es wird viel schwerer, 'ich' zu sagen, und doch zugleich oft unerlässlich. Die Suche nach einer Methode, dieser Realität schreibend gerecht zu werden, möchte ich vorläufig 'subjektive Authentizität' nennen - und ich kann nur hoffen, deutlich gemacht zu haben, dass sie die Existenz der objektiven Realität nicht nur nicht bestreitet, sondern gerade eine Bemühung darstellt, sich mit ihr produktiv auseinanderzusetzen."

If this was Christa Wolf's sense of authentication, my discussion will reveal that from 1979 she takes the authentication of the same subject-matter not from personal experience but from literary sources.

To define the present moment and to determine a direction for the future she looks to her own past and to historical models as in *Kein Ort. Nirgends* (1979) and her latest publication *Kassandra* (1983). Her dialectical method incorporates the past in the present as she demonstrates when she negates the negation in the opening lines of *Kindheitsmuster*: "Das Vergangene ist *nicht tot*; es ist *nicht einmal vergangen*." (emphasis mine)²⁵

This brief profile of Christa Wolf's writings does not claim completeness; it was relevant only to my analysis of *Kein Ort. Nirgends*.²⁶

Kein Ort. Nirgends has appeal because it presents the writer delving into a literary past. In contrast to her previous works which contain outright autobiographical material, this narrative appears objective at first. It is set in the early Nineteenth Century and concerns itself with historical material. The sources for *Kein Ort. Nirgends* are Heinrich von Kleist's and Karoline von Günderrode's works and letters. Christa Wolf first came into contact with Kleist in the early 1950's when she was a student studying German Literature in Jena and Leipzig. Anna Seghers is responsible for introducing her to Günderrode.

25. Cf. Christa Wolf, "Der Sinn einer neuen Sache" in: *Lesen und Schreiben Neue Sammlung*, p. 164: "(...) Vergangenes möge nicht vergangen, nicht tot sein, es möge sich nicht ein für allemal verfestigen. Das Mittel dagegen ist die Neuerschaffung der Vergangenheit, die allerdings auch nicht zu jedem beliebigen Zeitpunkt möglich ist, sondern nur genau in jenem vergänglichem Moment, da die undurchsichtige Gegenwart so weit zurückgetreten ist, um durchsichtig, dem Erzähler verfügbar zu sein; aber noch nah genug, dass man nicht damit 'fertig' ist (...)."
26. Christa Wolf, *Kein Ort. Nirgends* (Darmstadt and Neuwied, Luchterhand, 1979). The first edition was published in 1979 by Aufbau Verlag in Weimar. I shall here quote from the Luchterhand edition only.

Christa Wolf's intense interest led her to publish a collection of Günderrode's poems, letters and literary fragments, as well as a literary profile of Günderrode in *Der Schatten eines Traumes*.²⁷

The initial reception of *Kein Ort. Nirgends* was tentative, to say the least. This was in direct contrast to Günter Grass' *Das Treffen in Telgte*,²⁸ which also appeared in 1979 and which narrates the meeting of writers in an historical setting. Significantly, this book was translated into English in 1981 -- *Kein Ort. Nirgends* remains untranslated. The indifference towards *Kein Ort. Nirgends* is more striking when one reads the laudatory remarks of newspaper reviews: "neben *Kindheitsmuster* das bedeutendste Werk der Autorin",²⁹ "eines der wichtigen Bücher der zeitgenössischen Literatur",³⁰ "meisterhafte Sprache",³¹ and "man weiss, dass es sich bei diesem Buch um ein Meisterwerk handelt".³² For a book deserving of such high praise, it is surprising that it has not been treated in the more critical literature.³³

The ambivalent reception among critics is rather a mark of their inability to come to terms with a piece of esoteric writing.³⁴

27. *Der Schatten eines Traumes* ed. Christa Wolf (Darmstadt and Neuwied, 1979). This volume greatly helps the reader to understand the figure of Günderrode in *Kein Ort. Nirgends*.
28. Günter Grass, *Das Treffen in Telgte* (Darmstadt and Neuwied, 1979).
29. Elsbeth Pulver, "Begreifen, dass wir ein Entwurf sind" in: *Aargauer Tagblatt* (25/8/79).
30. Ibid.
31. Charles Linsmayer, "Kein Ort. Nirgends" in: *Badener Tagblatt* (16/6/79).
32. Ibid.
33. For a list of the secondary literature on *Kein Ort. Nirgends* see pp. 82-84 below.
34. Cf. Manfred Jäger, "Verzweifelte Utopie, lockere Ironie" in: *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt* (15/4/79): "Aber insgesamt erwartet Christa Wolf von ihren Lesern diesmal einiges germanistische Vorwissen, so dass man das kleine Werk wohl mit Recht eine 'Erzählung für die Freunde der Literaturgeschichte' nennen könnte."

Even Wilfried F. Schoeller who has a special interest in Christa Wolf -- a transcript of a conversation between him and Christa Wolf in October 1978 has been published under the title: "Ich bin schon für eine gewisse Masslosigkeit"³⁵ -- condemns her for moralising "auf eine letztlich ermüdende Weise",³⁶ and, to conclude his scathing attack, he claims: "Mit dieser Erzählung hat sich eine bedeutende Autorin in der Form vertan."³⁷

The reception of *Kein Ort. Nirgends* is, more than anything, due to the determination of critics to see Christa Wolf's narrative as just another piece of feminist literature.³⁸ They feel that in virtue of her "Sozialisationseigenschaften"³⁹ Günderrode is in a position "in verausgabender Liebe und in künstlerischer Produktivität innere Ganzheit und Identität mit sich selber zu erreichen";⁴⁰ in contrast, Kleist represents "die Verunmöglichung wirksamen politischen Handelns"⁴¹ and "die zum Scheitern verurteilte Tat und die Verlockung durch Macht".⁴²

35. A transcript of this conversation may be found in: *Christa Wolf Materialienbuch*, pp. 53-63.
36. Wilfried F. Schoeller, "Nicht gelungen, gewiss nicht" in: *Frankfurter Rundschau* (9/4/79).
37. Ibid.
38. This interpretation, for example, is held by: Sonja Hilzinger, "Der Wunsch nach 'Berührung'" in: *Kassandra. Über Christa Wolf* (Frankfurt, 1982); Günter Kunert, "Zweige vom selben Stamm" in: *Christa Wolf Materialienbuch*; Wilfried F. Schoeller, "Nicht gelungen, gewiss nicht"; Rolf Michaelis, "Eine andre Art von Tod" in: *Die Zeit* (Hamburg, 16/3/79); Sibylle Wirsing, "Das Malheur zu allem Unglück" in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (24/3/79); Charles Linsmayer, "Kein Ort. Nirgends" in: *Badener Tagblatt* (16/6/79).
39. Sonja Hilzinger, "Der Wunsch nach 'Berührung'", p.50.
40. Ibid p.50.
41. Ibid p.44.
42. Ibid p.44.

Günter Kunert believes Kleist's "Frauenbild"⁴³ and "unaufhebbarer Egozentrismus"⁴⁴ stifle any bond which could develop between the two protagonists. Critics who share this one-sided interpretation necessarily view *Kein Ort. Nirgends* in a negative light. It is possible that this attitude has originated from the fact that Christa Wolf's main literary figures tend to be women. Christa Wolf, however, does not favour Günderrode and the narrative may be interpreted in a more optimistic light. For the sake of the argument, both man and woman must become human first before they can live in harmony.⁴⁵ Christa Wolf prefaces her argument with two quotations which have their origin in Kleist's and Günderrode's letters respectively. Christa Wolf thereby accords her characters equal status from the outset. This distinguishes *Kein Ort. Nirgends* immediately from the rest of her works in that her interest is shared equally between a male and a female character.

Critics have also failed to treat Christa Wolf's narration of *Kein Ort. Nirgends* satisfactorily. The narrative, as we shall see, explores the technique of shifting the focus from one character to another. Some critics have held this method of narration against Christa Wolf.⁴⁶

43. Günter Kunert, "Zweige vom selben Stamm" p.18.

44. Ibid p.18.

45. Cf. Dagmar Ploetz, "Zügel, die ins Fleisch schneiden" in: *Deutsche Volkszeitung* (Düsseldorf, 8/3/79): "Die Geschlechterproblematik, die in Christa Wolfs Werk zunehmend an Bedeutung gewinnt, wird hier zu einem der zentralen Motive. Wie immer steht im Vordergrund nicht die Frage nach der Emanzipation der Frau, sondern nach der Vollendung des Menschen. Die Idee ist 'in die Welt gesetzt' und hat zum ersten Mal die Frauen erfasst."

46. For example: Wilfried F. Schoeller, "Nicht gelungen, gewiss nicht"; Rolf Michaelis, "Eine andre Art von Tod".

Rolf Michaelis⁴⁷ believes that the "Collage" of quotations and pronouncements now from Kleist, now from Günderröde only serves to bewilder the reader. Pointedly Michaelis asks: "Denn 'wer spricht?'" However, I shall demonstrate that the strength of the narration resides in this 'disturbing' ambiguity. To the embarrassment of the critics,⁴⁸ *Kein Ort. Nirgends* is not composed simply of 'interior monologue and dialogue' in the conventional meaning of the terms. Such a description fails to appreciate the subtle shifts of narrative focus that is placed now *within*, now *outside* the characters.

In my analysis of *Kein Ort. Nirgends*, I shall show what led to the encounter of Kleist and Günderröde (Chapter One). I shall then proceed to examine the two protagonists separately and draw some comparisons between them (Chapter Two). An examination of the narrative will demonstrate how, through language, Christa Wolf reconciles the gender differences between Kleist and Günderröde (Chapter Three). At the conclusion of my thesis I shall try to show what significance this narrative may have for our time (Chapter Four).

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47. Ibid

48. For example: Wolfgang Werth, "Für Unlösbares gibt es keine Form" in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich, 4/4/79); Charles Linsmayer, "Kein Ort. Nirgends"; Wilfried F. Schoeller, "Nicht gelungen, gewiss nicht"; Rolf Michaelis, "Eine andre Art von Tod"; Elsbeth Pulver, "Begreifen, dass wir ein Entwurf sind".