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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Klapper, J 2017, 'Dissent and Cultural Pessimism in Ernst Wiechert's Der weiße Büffel oder Von der großen Gerechtigkeit: Literary "Inner Emigration" under National Socialism', *The German Quarterly*, vol. 90, no. 1, pp. 1.

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Dissent and Cultural Pessimism in Ernst Wiechert's *Der weiße Büffel oder Von der großen Gerechtigkeit*: Literary "Inner Emigration" under National Socialism

Introduction

Following the infamous postwar controversy involving Thomas Mann, Walter von Molo, and Frank Thiess (Grosser; Brockmann) and early apologist discussions of writing under National Socialism (Paetel; von Koenigswald), some literary scholars came to reject the notion of an "inner emigration" (Schonauer). Others emphasized the ambivalent character of certain Christian conservative authors' work, arguing that their privatist flight into the historical, metaphysical, and apolitical could readily be interpreted as supportive of Nazi ideology (Loewy; Schnell). In an important study, Grimm (48) sought to avoid the resistance-conformity dichotomy by promoting a sliding nonconformist scale ranging from open resistance to passive refusal. Building on this and avoiding ideological prejudgment of publishing under National Socialism, scholars have more recently endeavored to reevaluate texts of the period by examining publication context, reception, and authorial reputation (Donahue and Kirchner; Golaszewski et al.; Klapper). Particular attention has been paid to the technique and function of the so-called "verdeckte Schreibweise," which has been the subject of several significant studies (e.g., Dodd; Ehrke-Rotermund and Rotermund).

Despite cultural policy restrictions subtly disguised short literary works and journalistic texts appeared after 1933 in both liberal (e.g. *Frankfurter Zeitung*, *Kölnische Zeitung*) and state or party newspapers (*Krakauer Zeitung*, *Völkischer Beobachter*), while individual publishers (Goverts, Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, Insel, List, Kösel & Pustet) continued to distribute work that could be read as not conforming to the principles of the regime. The mostly conservative authors of such texts adopted a conscious and calculated silence on ideologically conformist subjects, while writing about alternative topoi, frequently under the protection of historical camouflage. The challenge was to perform a balancing act of communicating a critical stance with clarity to an attuned and like-minded readership, while simultaneously rendering the text sufficiently ambiguous to create doubt about its actual meaning in the minds of less well-disposed readers, most notably state- and party-controlled censorship bodies. The process presumed a heightened sensitivity to nuance, suggestion, and key fictional tropes, and also a select, insider readership, which has been dubbed “esoteric” in contrast to the “exoteric” audience for messages that conformed to the dominant Nazi discourse.¹ Techniques included disguising critical or nonconformist elements by adding an affirmative or neutral statement, changing the order in which contentious material appeared in the text, or alerting sensitized readers to critical content through conscious use of stylistic oddities (Ehrke-Rotermund and Rotermund 16–19).

Among the most significant of substitution techniques was the use of tropes and figures that contributed to a metaphor or allegory of life under National Socialism. Works employing this approach included historical anecdotes and legends. They have been designated “Aesopian,” denoting fable- or fairy tale-like narratives written in a camouflaged manner often involving myths.² The terms “Aesopian” and “Aesopian method” refer back to the disputed Ancient Greek figure of Aesop in the sixth century BC and his supposed use of allegory in animal fables to disguise opinions on the authorities in Africa (Reifarth 16–19). Over time, use of the terms has been broadened to denote any critical intellectual attitude

expressed in a veiled artistic form in the face of an oppressive regime's attempt to suppress dissent, such as Dolf Sternberger's (8–13) retelling in 1941 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* of the fable of the wolf and the lamb, an allegory on Nazis and Jews.

This article explores a key example of the Aesopian genre, *Der weiße Büffel oder Von der großen Gerechtigkeit* (1937/1945) by the controversial inner emigrant writer Ernst Wiechert. There has been little detailed research on the text and the current study seeks to establish the importance of the novella within inner emigrant writing by exploiting archival materials and published sources from the 1930s to suggest a more balanced view of the writer's relationship with National Socialism than that presented by previous scholarly depictions of an essentially conformist figure, to provide significant new insights into both Wiechert's dissident novella and his cultural and political disposition, and thus to address the questions: to what extent does the author's insistent inwardness and political conservatism contribute to our wider understanding of writing under National Socialism? And, more generally, what is the value of studying nonconformist texts of the period?³

Wiechert and National Socialism

Wiechert never received a publication ban in Nazi Germany, his works sold in remarkably large numbers, and after the war he sought to substantiate his supposed credentials as an opponent and victim of the regime through his biased and in some respects distorting memoirs, *Jahre und Zeiten* (1949, SW9).⁴

The early fiction (e.g., *Der Totenwolf*, 1924, SW2) reveals *völkisch* themes, in particular the notion of the "Edelgermane" and criticism of Christianity for edging out the heathen Germanic order. These ideas, which are entirely congruent with "Blut und Boden" mythology, established Wiechert's nationalist credentials and ensured the endorsement of his work in Nazi circles. Indeed, with their irrational view of history, allied to the author's antipathy to party democracy, the early works have prompted the view of him as a fascist

ideological “Wegbereiter” (Schnell 6). Consequently, even after 1933, when he began to distance himself from Nazi tactics (see below) he was considered sympathetic to the regime and was able to publish in the newly merged Langen-Müller Verlag, affiliated from 1936 to the Nazi Arbeitsfront.⁵ His work was favorably reviewed in Will Vesper’s *Die Neue Literatur* (EWB2 55), primarily because his strong, independent characters, rooted in the soil of the *Heimat* and displaying a faithfulness and self-sacrifice shrouded in natural mysticism, sat well with the posited ideal of the German hero fully committed to the *Volksgemeinschaft* (van Ingen). This and his conservative cultural thinking more generally have been seen as confirming the fatalistic passivity of Germans under Hitler, justifying a retreat to an ineffectual sphere of spiritual values and thus potentially stabilizing the regime (Delabar; Hattwig; Franke).

However, the contradictory nature of Wiechert’s political stance is evident in his signing in 1931 of a solidarity declaration with left-wing writers threatened with exclusion from the *Schutzverband Deutscher Schriftsteller* (Krenzlin 515n) and in his failure to sign a document of March 1933 swearing allegiance to Hitler (EWB2 25). Furthermore, examination of the content and tone of his writing from the late 1920s reveals the former Germanic aggression had begun to be supplanted by a sense of Christian tolerance and forgiveness, as he experienced a spiritual transformation with complex roots in his personal life (“Lebensabriß” [1932], SW10 712; JuZ 579–609). Although he was still championed in *völkisch* circles, his subsequent work was shaped by a concern with ethics and Christian morality; rather than glorifying war and heroicizing the German soldier, it now focused on the negative consequences of military conflict, both at the front and at home (*Der Hauptmann von Kapernaum*, 1929, SW7) and depicted characters suffering physically or spiritually, who are met with variously humanist and Christian responses (the stories *Jedermann* [1932, SW3] and *Die Gebärde* [1932, SW7] with their sympathetic portrayal of Jewish figures).

A speech delivered in summer 1933, “Der Dichter und die Jugend,” enjoyed a wide readership (EWB1 25–26, 52). While stopping short of direct criticism, it expressed reservations about the recent book burnings, rabble-rousing speeches, and staged demonstrations of the Nazi “revolution” (SW10 364). In spring 1935, the far more outspoken speech “Der Dichter und seine Zeit” was targeted *inter alia* at the cultural politics of the new regime and the spread of violence. It decried the prevailing “anarchic” morality (376–77) and exhorted the young audience to hold firm to truth, freedom, and the rule of law. It further undermined Nazi dreams of establishing a thousand-year *Reich*, openly contemplating the decline of contemporary Germany and its moral corruption: “Dieses Volk steht schon auf einer jäh sich neigenden Ebene und das Gesetz seines Untergangs ist ihm schon geschrieben. Es kann auch sein, daß ein Volk aufhört, gut und böse zu unterscheiden” (379). Too problematic to be published in Germany, the typescript was illegally disseminated and even smuggled abroad (JuZ 657–58), with an edited version eventually being published in the exile literary journal *Das Wort* in Moscow. Archival sources confirm Wiechert was henceforth viewed with suspicion by the regime, designated ideologically and politically “nicht zuverlässig,”⁶ and openly attacked in a publication of the Hitler Youth (EWB 46–47). Correspondence in the Marbach archive further shows that he started to decline invitations to officially sanctioned public readings and literary gatherings, including one from Hans Grimm, organizer of the annual Lippoldsberg Writers’ Meetings,⁷ and that he was in turn increasingly excluded by the authorities from the cultural life of the Third Reich.⁸

These developments, together with an increasing sense of isolation, as former associates now considered him a liability,⁹ and flagrant abuses of the rule of law, prompted a protest against the wholly unlawful imprisonment of Protestant Pastor Martin Niemöller, whose arrest, in Wiechert’s eyes, showed contempt for the principles of justice.¹⁰ In a letter of 21 March 1938 to the local *Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt* (NSV), he refused for this reason to pay his NSV and *Winterhilfswerk* contributions (EWB2 44–46) and was

subsequently arrested and incarcerated for a physically debilitating seven weeks in Buchenwald, an experience recorded in the semi-documentary *Der Totenwald*. Released on 26 August 1938, he was warned at a personal audience with Goebbels about his future conduct (Goebbels 1263).¹¹ His membership of the *Reichsschrifttumskammer* (RSK), and thus his right to publish, were reinstated, but all subsequent work was to be subjected to pre-publication scrutiny. Despite claims of restrictions on publishers and booksellers seeking to promote his work (JuZ 686), Wiechert's name does not appear in RSK lists of "undesirable" writing (see EWB2 146–50) and sales figures for his books from 1935 to 1942 remained strong, earning him a considerable income (EWB2 162–70, 182). Most significant here was the novel *Das einfache Leben* (1939, SW4),¹² which, though criticized for encouraging escapism and passivity, also offers an attuned contemporary readership a mix of reassurance, consolation, and spiritual sustenance similar to that of the unpublishable *Der weiße Büffel*.

Origins of the Novella and its Reception

By the autumn of 1937 Wiechert's outrage at Nazi legal excesses had prompted him to break out of his isolation by organizing directly with local book dealers an independent reading tour in the Rhineland. As contemporary newspaper reports reveal, book shops in Stuttgart (13 November), Bonn (15th) and Essen (17th), as well as the *Literarische Gesellschaft* in Cologne (19th) proved willing to host the readings (EWB2 88–90 and EWB3 50), and he used the opportunity to read in each of these venues *inter alia* from a new novella, then entitled *Der weiße Büffel oder die große Gerechtigkeit* (SW6), which had been written in 18 days in September that year.¹³ The readings attracted large audiences: newspaper accounts at the time talked of rooms filled to bursting, and even a Gestapo report on the evening in Essen estimated the audience at 800.¹⁴ The writer Walter Bauer says one of these gatherings attracted an astonishing 2,000 people and that the audience was "gripped" by the reading (186–87). Ever since his 1935 speech Wiechert had been under police surveillance and these

readings too were monitored by the Gestapo (Pleßke 767). However, the authorities did not react immediately: the organizers had, after all, sought and been granted official permission for the events and Wiechert clearly commanded a significant readership, so interruption of the closely timetabled series would have been far from straightforward.

Most reviews of the readings were decidedly cool and factual. Keen to gloss over subject matter that was problematic for the regime, they studiously avoided drawing attention to the key themes of law and justice, the limits of earthly power, and the danger of blind faith in a violent leader. One review willfully misinterprets the story: after first comparing it unfavorably with the “approved” *Der Totenwolf*, the reviewer proceeds to criticize the work’s pacifist failure to depict the oppressed Indian people’s freedom from slavery, associates the tyrant figure of Murduk with the oppressors of the German people, and presents the Nazis as their decisive liberators (Eilers). Gerhard F. Hering ventures a more sympathetic and potentially controversial version of the evening in Cologne, referring to the nationwide love and trust surrounding Wiechert. With its implication of a threat to the writer, talk of “die Gültigkeit von Recht und Gerechtigkeit,” reference to the tyrant’s forced recognition of “den Grenzen aller irdischen Macht und Gewalt,” and the emphasis on an author communicating with a like-minded community (51–52), this article was itself daring and not surprisingly was slapped down in a subsequent critique (Westecker). An implicit linking of legend and German present is provided by Hans Schomaker, who says even when Wiechert addresses foreign content he is deploying “deutsche Charaktere und Gleichnisse” (89).

Archival correspondence suggests that Gustav Pezold, head of the Langen-Müller Verlag, at first welcomed the novella but later refused to publish it, no doubt having realized its potentially explosive nature and the risk it posed for the firm.¹⁵ This led Wiechert at the beginning of December 1937 to break off ties with the publishers, sensing a tendency to “das politisch Zweckmässige.”¹⁶ In due course the authorities blocked all future promotion of the writer and his work: in February 1938 the *Lektorenbrief* of the *Amt Schrifttumspflege* stated

Wiechert was not to be supported (“Wichtige Hinweise”); an archival source suggests the RSK refused him permission to read from his work in Austria, Italy, and Switzerland;¹⁷ and he was taken to task in a number of reviews, such as one published in *Der Buchhändler im neuen Reich*, which criticized his escapism, egocentricity, and “prophetische Anmaßung” (Eschenburg). However, the novella soon became known abroad, most likely through word of mouth, and was seen as an act of resistance (e.g., X.Y.). It was also considered by the SPD in exile to be a classic example of a disguised literary work, promoting “Freiheit, Recht und Menschlichkeit” (Sopade 1651). Testimony to the powerful effect of Wiechert’s text is provided in a letter of 1943, held in the Wiechert archive, from a German officer serving in the military judiciary, who affirms the relevance to his own work of the writer’s engagement with the reality of justice and the justification of power (Neudeck).

Yet, despite the stir it caused at the time, *Der weiße Büffel* has attracted relatively little attention since, barely warranting a mention in many studies of literary inner emigration. Even discussions of Wiechert have devoted limited space to it, and then mainly in connection with the writer’s subsequent stand in the Niemöller affair. Thus Wiesner sees it as “ein Musterbeispiel raffiniertester literarischer Camouflage” (404), Brekle calls it a positive contribution to antifascist literature (115), and Niven deems the “subversive” story “the greatest piece of writing Wiechert ever achieved” (3). Grimm, acknowledges it to be one of the boldest examples of the “äsoische[n] Schreibweise oder Sklavensprache” and notes that its contemporary references are strikingly clear (55). The only specific studies devoted to the novella are a section in Hattwig’s monograph (80–104) that focuses on Wiechert’s ahistoricism, Parkes-Perret’s article exploring both the Niemöller parallel and Indian sources, and the Rotermunds’ largely contextual discussion of the work as an act of self-liberation (124–51). What is missing is an understanding of the relationship between the novella’s alleged nonconformist content and its author’s contentious political and cultural views, and of the relevance of this to inner emigrant writing as a whole.

Der weiße Büffel and Justice

Set in India in pre-Christian times, *Der weiße Büffel* is the simple narrative of a young warrior, Vasudeva, whose insight into the emptiness of violence and pillaging causes him to embrace a new life of renunciation and self-denial. He demands justice for villagers wronged by King Murduk's soldiers but steadfastly refuses to bow before the sovereign, resists threats of torture, and is killed. Tormented by visions of the dead man, Murduk comes to realize his violent rule has been defeated by Vasudeva's spiritual resistance.

The novella's defense of the rule of law is quite in keeping with Wiechert's other writings of the period, such as the 1935 speech. In the childhood recollections *Wälder und Menschen* (1936, SW9) justice is a recurrent theme, and in a key passage about his refusal to salute a uniformed senior forester and the official's subsequent complaint, he reveals simultaneously the autobiographical roots of the 1937 novella and his instinctive refusal to subordinate himself to illegitimate authority, talking about his fundamental "Unfähigkeit, einem Unrecht schweigend zuzusehen, und das Unvermögen, sich vor Menschen zu beugen, wenn die Beugung nicht gleichzeitig die vor dem Recht oder der Größe sein konnte" (68). The same theme is the driving force behind the spiritual crisis experienced by the autobiographical Johannes at the start of *Der Totenwald* and his despair at the apparent victory of violence over justice (SW9 207). Later in the report, the sign hanging above the Buchenwald camp gate, "Recht oder Unrecht: mein Vaterland!" (259), is considered a morally abhorrent suppression of a basic ethical principle to the dictates of the state. *Der weiße Büffel* lends expression to this conviction of the inviolability of justice in a bold variation on the Aesopian method.

Vasudeva's crisis comes to a head following a murderous battle when, in a trance-like state, he sees his mother anointing warriors' corpses but declining to help the "spiritually dead" Vasudeva. His sword, which throughout the novella acts as a symbol of unlawful rule,

is still a barrier separating him from the world, and in dropping it and prostrating himself before his mother, he performs the ultimate act of repentance and submission, renouncing worldly power and implicitly accepting her selfless, god-fearing stance. The Vasudeva who returns to his native village is no longer the impulsive fighter rebelling against the world but someone searching for meaning, who knows suffering and has compassion. He pursues a life of contemplativeness and humility, and embraces an ascetic lifestyle devoted to the good of the community. He is portrayed here in almost Christ-like terms—he has the ability to lay on hands to help the afflicted and seems to act as an intermediary between the villagers and the gods (590)—and this image of him serves as a positive counter image to the heroic Nazi ideal.

The novella is constructed around a number of parallels, including Vasudeva's life before and after the decisive battle, reflected in the two-chapter structure and the two injustices visited upon the village. Both chapters conclude in similar fashion: in the first, Vasudeva's mother leads him into the wood, and thence to a new life, along a path that, when lit by the sun, "glühte [...] auf wie ein in Blut getauchtes Band" (588); and in the second, the line of white buffaloes is "ein breites und glühendes Band" (624) leading off into the distance; the repetition links Vasudeva's renunciation of vengeful violence to Murduk's conciliatory act of restitution.

This parallelism is a key to the second part of the novella. The central characters are linked by their obsessive and violent pursuit of power (599) and Murduk uses their similar pasts and supposed common outlook to try to persuade Vasudeva to bow before him, but his notion of "self-seeking" power, sustained and perpetuated by the might of the sword, is countered by Vasudeva's mystical belief that the law is god-given and a key distinguishing feature of mankind: "Als das Recht begann, hörten wir auf wie der Mörder des Waldes zu sein, [...] denn Recht ist nur unter Menschen" (609). Murduk's appeal is in vain, and in a paradoxical shift of position it becomes clear that it is the physical prisoner who is the freer of the two, bound only by his devotion to the gods, whereas the king is captive to his fearful

addiction to power and his obsessive defense of it (606). Murduk's violence cannot guarantee his authority, and, indeed, even after he has killed Vasudeva, he is tormented by the trembling stones of the latter's tomb. Soon, as he starts to sense the error of his ways, he follows Vasudeva's example, relinquishes power, and combines inner renewal with restitution by having his brother dispatch 100 white water buffalo to Vasudeva's village in a "Karawane der Gerechtigkeit" (625).

The Novella and Nazi Germany

In general terms, it is not difficult to recognize key features of Nazi Germany in the portrayal of an aspiration to subject all aspects of society to the ruling regime, in the depiction of the pursuit of violence for its own sake, and the denial of any higher authority or law. However, there are also numerous *specific* suggestive parallels such as the atmosphere of fear and the use of torture that pervade Murduk's kingdom, the near-deification of the leader, and the description of a master race "from the north." Vasudeva's refusal to venerate the image of Murduk is an only thinly disguised reference to the, by 1937 compulsory, "Hitler-Gruß." The public execution of Vasudeva is accompanied by descriptions strongly reminiscent of Nazi gatherings, especially the infamous party congresses, with reference to a "braune Mauer" of people surrounding the square in front of the tyrant's palace (616) and a "forest" of lances shimmering in the sunlight (617) (see Grimm 55). There are also less obvious parallels: the title refers to the restitutive justice that Vasudeva demands for his clansman, but beyond the legend it also draws attention to the primacy of justice in human affairs—a message of striking relevance and immediacy for a society whose judiciary was so frequently sidelined by arbitrary political decisions. Even more indirectly, the unusual collocation (cf. "große Ungerechtigkeit"), in what is also a distinctly wordy title, points the reader from the very start to a hidden, implied meaning.

Both content and form are significant. For readers familiar with Wiechert's already substantial *oeuvre*, the highly uncharacteristic choice of an exotic non-European and pre-Christian setting was itself an indication that the author was aspiring to some form of camouflage. The novella's distinctiveness is further highlighted by the narrative style: the characterization is less involved, the structure simpler, the syntax less convoluted, and the tone less sentimental than in many of Wiechert's other works. There is also a greater moral intensity and a direct focus on the ethical message.

The development of Vasudeva's mindset, his transition from man of violence to humble, saint-like intermediary, reflects the idealistic view that violent dictatorship is not to be met with violence, that living moral examples are the only way to counter the evil of the world and to champion divinely inspired law and justice. There are connections here with Martin Niemöller, seen by Wiechert as a moral example for contemporary Germany. Parkes-Perret notes that, like Vasudeva, Niemöller became the leader of a "Freikorps" outfit, later regretted having shot at fellow countrymen, became deeply concerned with the question of truth, studied theology, on principle opposed an oppressive regime, was arrested, and became a personal prisoner of his ruler (566–69). This argument has much to commend it: Niemöller's autobiography, *Vom U-Boot zur Kanzel* (1934) was already well known; Wiechert clearly felt an affinity with the bold clergyman; and the writer's outraged protest at the regime's flouting of the basic principles of justice in Niemöller's case suggests a model for Vasudeva's ethical rigor and self-sacrifice.

Part of the novella's depiction of vengeance as a morally questionable stance is the implicit attack on the Nazi practice of "Sippenhaft," or "Sippenhaftung," according to which perpetrators' relatives were considered to be equally responsible for crimes committed against the state and were liable to the same punishment.¹⁸ The exchanges with Murduk offer a damning critique of absolute power, violence, torture, and the execution of prisoners. The despot's impotence and moral defeat in threatening vengeance on Vasudeva's kin, and

eventually throwing his mother to the flames, suggest parallels with the reality of Nazi justice. Vasudeva's defiant words "Die Marter ist immer da, wenn die Macht ohnmächtig wird" (607) constituted a direct challenge to Nazi authority.

The only names used in the work are Vasudeva and Murduk. The former (from Hindi *vāsu* "good" and *deva* "deity") is a common Indian male name, which in Hindu mythology is the patronymic of Krishna who, according to one tradition, was a son of Vāsudeva.¹⁹ Vāsudeva was known for his constancy and truthfulness, and this virtuousness and the link to the godhead are significant in setting Vasudeva apart from the power-obsessed and self-deceiving tyrant. Murduk, on the other hand, is not an Indian name but is almost certainly a reference to the god more commonly known as "Marduk" of ancient Mesopotamia, the patron deity of the city of Babylon, dating back to the eighteenth century BC.²⁰ It is not clear why Wiechert changed the spelling of the god's name but it may have been his desire through a simple camouflaged linguistic corruption to associate the king as Hitler cipher with the virtual *leitmotiv* of the novella "Mörder," which is repeatedly used to designate tigers and crocodiles, even if "duk" as a corruption of the Italian *duce* is less certain (cf. Grimm 55n157).

A final key element in the construction of this mythical critique of contemporary Nazi Germany, is the novella's network of Christian parallels. Thus, Vasudeva's refusal to recognize Murduk's authority ("Es geschehe, wie die Götter es wollen"; 599–600) echoes Christ's exchange with Pilate ("You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above"; John 19.11). Similarly, while trying to persuade him to bow down before him, Murduk shows Vasudeva the wonder of life, to tempt him with the material world and make him weaken; both this scene and his next exchange with Murduk on the roof of the palace ("wie auf einem hohen Berge"; 604) have echoes of the devil's temptation of Christ (Matt. 4.8–9). Vasudeva's death is also one endured in imitation of Christ and is supported by the martyr's death willingly undertaken by his mother. We are further told that by the end of the story Vasudeva is 30, the age at which Christ is reported to have begun to perform his

miracles, and, as indicated above, in Christ-like fashion he practices the laying on of hands. The song sung by his mother as she goes to her death, with its repeated “Selig ist der Leib, der dich geboren, o Vasudeva!” (618), echoes the words associated with the Annunciation of Mary (Luke 1.42). Similarly, on three occasions (564, 587, 614), Vasudeva’s mother is described as comforting her son like Mary cradling the dead Christ, with more than a hint of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*.

The Impotence of Spiritual Values?

There is thus much in Wiechert’s novella to support the view of it as a statement of dissent from Nazism. Yet, this needs qualifying. As with all inner emigrant writing, biographical and contextual data are central to interpretive approaches, and here no reading is complete without a consideration of the writer’s historical and cultural pessimism and the contradictory elements this gives rise to in the text. First, as Wiechert’s writing more generally reveals, especially his essays and diaries (e.g., “Grablegung oder Auferstehung”; SW10), the rise of Nazism is to be attributed ultimately to the crisis of civilization initiated by the Enlightenment and the pernicious illness that subsequently infected the western world and unleashed “Dämonen” hitherto restrained by the “Zauber der Religion, der Sittlichkeit, der Demut, des Gehorsams” (930). Nazi terror, as a consequence of such aberrant but connate demonic forces, is merely one instance of a more general global trend in the technical age that renders all nations victims of oppression and dictatorship. Wiechert’s criticism of Nazism essentially only ever relates to its surface phenomena, which are presented as ephemeral and as incapable of assailing the core, eternally valid values of a religiously inspired morality and a life lived in harmony with nature.

Second, and linked to this, he considers modernism a symptom of a culture in demise. He is suspicious of rationalism, philosophical abstraction, and experimentalism in art (JuZ 741), seeing in them signs of dissolution. Coming close to Nazi cultural rhetoric, he further

labels modernist painting degenerate and Thomas Mann's work a reflection of decay, arguing that neither can renew German culture (SW10 933, 935).²¹ Elsewhere he bemoans the descent of culture to the material realm (JuZ 623–24) and rejects a political role for literature, insisting on the essential dualism of art and politics. He accordingly compares the writer's role to that of a priest who administers his work like an earthly sacrament to the suffering or the spiritually thirsty ("Über Kunst und Künstler"; SW10 423) and, affirming the immutable laws of nature and a timeless world beyond historical developments, sees writers as "Bewahrer des Unvergänglichen" (362), who sit apart and seek to transform the "Rausch der Zeit" into "ein kleines Wort der Ewigkeit" ("Der Dichter und die Zeit"; 10 890).

How does all this impact on the expressive force of Wiechert's Aesopian critique of Nazi oppression? The emphasis in Vasudeva's defiance of the dictator is on his other-worldliness, his rejection of the ties of power, possessions, and even family, and his championing of the abstract principles of truth and justice. Thus, while Murduk stands as the representative of Nazi rule and Wiechert attacks the excesses of the leader and his regime, no attempt is made to critique fundamental aspects of the system itself—including its origins, the legitimacy of a sole ruler, or his all-encompassing power (even in his defiant final words Vasudeva acknowledges the prevailing power structures and addresses Murduk as "Herr"; 620). Similarly, in their exchanges there seems to be a sense of sympathy with the lot of the lonely leader, who is constantly fearful of real or imagined threats to his position and power. Wiechert's primary target is the flouting of justice, not authoritarian rule per se, and the novella might be thought to reveal the same arch-conservative belief in naturally ordained social stratification evident in the life of service willingly accepted by Orla in *Das einfache Leben* or the workers' helpless dependence on their mistress in *Die Majorin*.²²

Furthermore, although the work's impassioned defense of a society based on the rule of law foreshadows the principled stand taken by Wiechert in the later Niemöller affair, this intervention was motivated not by a desire to question the purpose and aims of National

Socialism but rather by what he saw as a gross infringement of a higher principle held to be the guarantor of humanity. Accordingly, Vasudeva does not question the social hierarchy that the king presides over or the fact that the people cannot gain justice for themselves but have to have it granted to them by an enlightened despot. In this sense it is instructive that the apparently equally authoritarian regime of Murduk's son simply replaces that of his father.

The sense of sovereign calm and protection conveyed by the purified Vasudeva's Christ-like role, along with his easy moral superiority in the exchanges with Murduk, lends the novella a powerfully reassuring and consolatory tone. However, it also implies that injustice can only be addressed through dictatorial fiat, and that, correspondingly, Nazism, as a contemporary realization of a timeless evil principle, is not susceptible to outward political resistance but can only be defeated through the inner transformation of suffering within the individual to create a new moral order. Vasudeva thus cultivates the moral values of freedom and justice, which remain immune to Murduk's bribes and temptations, and, as the ending indicates, it is only through these internalized values that individuals can bring about meaningful change in others. Notwithstanding the Aesopian techniques at work here, the appropriateness to Germany under National Socialism of this idealistic resolution of the dilemma of the dissident individual under a tyrannical regime might be deemed questionable.

Finally, the novella also takes up the long-standing antagonism in Wiechert's writing between nature and civilization (see *Wälder und Menschen*, SW9 79–87). The easy-paced, harmonious, and loving community of Vasudeva's home amid the forest, a rural life of liberty lived close to the soil and in harmony with the animals and seasons, is contrasted with the speed, noise, and restrictions of the loveless town, in which stone dominates and repressive authorities intimidate and isolate the individual. This is quite in keeping with the demonization of city life seen in *Das einfache Leben* and that suspicion of technological progress that underpins Wiechert's Picard-influenced cultural pessimism.

Conclusion

For all its claims to dissident status, *Der weiße Büffel* is thus as much a document of its author's deep-seated skepticism about political and cultural progress as his earlier prose works. As *Das einfache Leben* demonstrates, Wiechert's mourning of the passing of the old Wilhelmine order was not motivated by regret at the ousting of monarchy but at the loss of the old patriarchal society with its rigid, hierarchical structure. His abiding social conservatism meant that in much of his post-1933 writing it is not the Nazis' overarching nationalist goals that are directly questioned but rather the means employed to achieve them: the arrogant assumption of illegitimate roles, narrow-minded cultural policies, and disregard for the rule of law (Krenzlin 402). In *Der weiße Büffel* too justice is held up as a mark of humanity but the, in many other ways, inhumane social order depicted in the novella is not subjected to systematic critique, and nowhere does one find an engagement with the causes of despotism or the consequences of condoning or conniving in an oppressive regime.

However, by the time Wiechert wrote the work he had burnt the bridges that had originally linked him to National Socialist ideology and there can be no doubting his opposition to the regime by this stage. The novella was certainly intended for publication and thus its attempt to assert the primacy of the rule of law in a society in which it had been steadily trampled under foot was a bold step. Vasudeva was for Wiechert the prophetic voice he admired in Niemöller and to which he himself aspired in his public protest. His subsequent arrest led to isolation and accentuated his cultural pessimism but in 1938 he was still a defiant voice.

Der weiße Büffel might be criticized for apparent escapism, for presenting a not entirely negative portrayal of a dictator, and even for being conciliatory, but the depiction of an archetype of oppressive rule, of a man imprisoned by his own despotism who is ultimately defeated by spiritual opposition, clearly struck a chord with a contemporary audience.

Furthermore, the novella's insistent, only thinly veiled parallels with aspects of life in Nazi

Germany, the sizeable gatherings attracted to the readings, and the sensitivity of the authorities to potential reputational damage, were they to proceed against Wiechert, all suggest the existence of a substantial community of tolerated opposition to Nazism and a work that spoke directly to this community. From the failure to secure publication, of course, one has to conclude that Wiechert misjudged the delicate balance between camouflaging a dissident message while simultaneously offering a “safe,” exoteric reading.

This Aesopian tale stands as a significant and instructive landmark in the, at times, rebarbative terrain of inner emigrant writing. Although it helps illuminate the problematic nature of these works, and indeed of almost all nonconformist writing in Nazi Germany (a pervasive historical irrationalism that all too often seems to discount the possibility of political or social change and thus runs the risk of confirming or even promoting a fateful passivity), any criticism of (inevitable) ambiguity and of the absence of a commitment to change needs to be counterbalanced by an acknowledgment of the way such literature affirmed Christian humanist values for sensitized readers.

In this regard, it has many things in common with other inner emigrant writing: works such as Werner Bergengruen’s exploration of dictatorship, temptation, and human weakness in *Der Großtyrann und das Gericht* (1935); Fritz Reck-Malleczewen’s sarcastic, camouflaged historical allegory in *Bockelson* (1937) with its reassuring emphasis on the inevitable transience of dictatorship; Reinhold Schneider’s illicitly circulated consolatory and exhortative poetry, with its biblical language and its focus on sacrifice and the example of Christ; Gertrud von le Fort’s allegorical novella *Die Consolata* (1943/1947), with its dominant theme of vicarious suffering, and her historical novel *Die Magdeburger Hochzeit* (1938), with its championing of selfless commitment and insistence on the ephemeral nature of oppressive regimes; Ernst Jünger’s boldly defiant rejection of aspects of Nazism in *Auf den Marmorklippen* (1939), with its depiction of violent dictatorship as part of a natural cycle followed inevitably by rebirth; and Erika Mitterer’s powerful historical allegory on the

psychology of oppression, fear, and denunciation in *Der Fürst der Welt* (1940). Like these works, Wiechert's novella served to reassure, encourage, and sustain its "insider" audience, offering through positive "Gegenbilder" and parallels to contemporaneous despotism a form of spiritual opposition, the power of whose effect is all too easy to dismiss in decontextualized, retrospective judgment. The focus on "eternal truths" may appear alien to a postmodernist world that questions and relativizes all value systems, but in the context of the time, like the above works, it constituted a defence of threatened (Christian) humanist values, of basic moral norms, providing a clear vision of human integrity and a bold advocacy of fundamental human rights. The novella's championing of exemplary courage and the pitting of timeless reality against prevailing oppression signalled to like-minded individuals the temporary nature of their suffering and conveyed a sense of not being alone in their spiritual opposition. For these reasons the novella remains a crucial work in helping us understand the literary function of the still controversial "inner emigration," and, along with Stefan Andres's *El Greco malt den Großinquisitor* (1936) and Schneider's *Las Casas vor Karl V* (1938), it is one of the most significant products of nonconformist writing under National Socialism. With the former's ambiguous anatomy of a despot and its portrayal of the dilemma facing the individual confronted by evil, it shares a quietist depiction of force as something at odds with the superior world of the spirit. While with the latter, an historical allegory on Nazi racial policy and expansionism, it has in common a focus on the dictates of conscience, personal moral responsibility, the inevitability of suffering, and the exemplary imitation of Christ. These works are examples of the type of oppositional literature that is likely, in Emmerich's words (451), to immunize against the "fascination" of fascist regimes in all periods and for this reason they still warrant contemporary readers' attention.

¹ The terms derive from the German Jewish political philosopher and classicist Leo Strauss, who was exiled in America—see Strauss.

² Such camouflage was, of course, frequently evident to literate censors but was part of a tolerated cultural “free space” (Klapper 91–92), just as carefully monitored nonconformist journalism was permitted as an “Aushängeschild” for Nazi Germany (Dodd 7–9).

³ I am grateful to my colleagues Hilary Brown and Elystan Griffiths for commenting on an early draft and to GQ’s three anonymous readers for their helpful comments.

⁴ Wiechert’s collected works are indicated by “SW” plus volume number. Subsequent references to the memoirs appear as “JuZ.” Research has been hampered by paucity of archive material: the Langen-Müller archive was destroyed in the war, the collection of Wiechert papers in Duisburg (currently moving to the *Ostpreußische Landesmuseum*, Lüneburg) is patchy, and the holdings of the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv*, Marbach (DLA), are very limited. Reiner’s four substantial document compilations—hereafter EWB1/2/3/4—are therefore important.

⁵ The firm did also publish less conformist writers and its journal *Das Innere Reich* featured, alongside the Nazi-friendly Beumelburg and Kolbenheyer, the likes of Klepper, Schneider, and Schröder.

⁶ Report dated 10 September 1936 from the *Kulturpolitisches Archiv* to the *Abteilung Schrifttum* of the Ministry of Propaganda, Bundesarchiv Berlin NS 15/85. Also in EWB2 73.

⁷ Letter from Ernst Wiechert to Hans Grimm, 15 February 1936. DLA, A: Grimm, Korrespondenz Grimm/Wiechert..

⁸ Letter from Ernst Wiechert to Hans Grimm, 18 March 1938, in which he reports his publishers’ exclusion of him from a meeting of authors as he was “unerwünscht” (ibid. 1); see also JuZ 677.

⁹ Letter from Wiechert to Heinrich Seidel, 27 August 1936, DLA, A: H.W. Seidel, 79.444/4; JuZ 658–59; and letter from Ernst Wiechert to Hans Grimm, 18 March 1938, DLA, A: Grimm, Korrespondenz Grimm/Wiechert 2.

¹⁰ The Protestant theologian had been arrested on 1 July 1937 and was convicted of activities against the state by a “Special Court” on 2 March 1938. Released, as he had already served a seven-month sentence in Moabit, he was immediately rearrested by the Gestapo and subsequently spent seven years in Sachsenhausen and Dachau, only being freed in May 1945.

¹¹ Cf. Goebbels 1247–48: “... dem sogen. Dichter Wiechert ... So ein Stück Dreck will sich gegen den Staat erheben.”

¹² Although the authorities issued negative “expert reports” on the work (Chatellier 181–84), up to the end of 1942 it sold 267,234 copies (EWB2 168, 171–72).

¹³ It was initially serialized in twelve installments from 12 to 27 December 1945 in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NRZ 166, Nr. 1894–1992), then published in book form by Rascher Verlag in Zurich in 1946 and later that year by Kurt Desch in Munich under Allied Control Command license (number US-E-101). The archive of the Langen-Müller Verlag in Marbach contains a 44-page typescript dated 1937 with this slightly different title; a comparison with the first published version reveals, beyond the title, merely typographical differences.

¹⁴ Gestapo-Außendienststelle Essen an die Staatspolizeistelle Düsseldorf, 19/22 November 1937, Hauptstaatsarchiv Düsseldorf, RW 58/52359, Bl. 3–4, quoted in Ehrke-Rotermund and Rotermund 150.

¹⁵ Letter from Wiechert to the Piper Verlag, 30 January 1938, DLA, A: Piper, Wiechert, Ernst, Briefe an ihn 98.5.

¹⁶ Letter from Wiechert to Hans Grimm, 18 March 1938, DLA, A: Grimm, Korrespondenz Grimm/Wiechert 1.

¹⁷ Ibid. 2.

¹⁸ Though never enshrined in law, the principle informed the Nazi system of justice, being especially influential in the early years of the Third Reich and during the Second World War (Loeffel).

¹⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Vasudeva-Hindu-god>. For further possible sources, see Ehrke-Rotermund and Rotermund (136, n 14) and Parkes-Perret (564).

²⁰ See Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Marduk>

²¹ Wiechert was influenced in these views by the work of his friend, the cultural critic and philosopher Max Picard. As revealed by the latter’s *Hitler in uns selbst* (1946), the two shared the view of National Socialism as a sign of general decline in modern culture, the expression of a radical historical break that endangered mankind’s essential humanity (see Hattwig 193–208).

²² One might be inclined to see behind this apparent respect for authority the influence of the Lutheran view of power and moral theology. With its rejection of an absolute right to resist earthly power, the latter is based on the scriptural precept that anyone who rejects human authority is rebelling against what God has instituted and will therefore be subject to divine judgment (Rom. 13.1–2). Based as it is on this teaching, Luther’s “Zwei-Reiche-Lehre” is a potential source of inner emigrant inwardness (see Grimm 70–71, Klapper 15–17) and it might be tempting to see in Wiechert’s views a form of “cultural Lutheranism.” However, it is precisely his

uncompromising championing of justice over all human authority that sets him apart from, for example, Klepper's fixation on obedience at all costs, and in his memoirs Wiechert directly criticizes unquestioning acceptance of authority: "Seit Luther, meinten wir, brauchten wir nicht zu denken. Wir nahmen, was er und seine Bewahrer uns reichten, und wer sich weigerte, war gezeichnet" (JuZ 511).

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