

1976

The Socialist Education of Rita Seidel: The Dialectics of Humanism and Authoritarianism in Christa Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel*

Willkie K. Cirker
Ohio State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr>

Recommended Citation

Cirker, Willkie K. (1976) "The Socialist Education of Rita Seidel: The Dialectics of Humanism and Authoritarianism in Christa Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel*," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 13: No. 2, Article 11.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol13/iss2/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Dayton Review by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

The Socialist Education of Rita Seidel

The Dialectics of Humanism and Authoritarianism in Christa Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel*

Willkie K. Cirker

When Christa Wolf's first novel *Der geteilte Himmel* was published in 1963, it precipitated within the GDR a flurry of varied and differing critical comment quite unusual for that country. The main controversy centered on the ideological message of the work which, according to some, was too vague and did not sufficiently extol the advantages of socialism in the GDR nor properly emphasize the leadership role of the Communist Party.¹ Others retorted that it was just this subjective lyrical quality which distinguished the book from the uninspired *Aufbauliteratur* of the Fifties in which there had been a plethora of socialist heroes only too willing to recite Marxist-Leninist slogans.² Critics in the West have concurred that the novel's concept of socialism is indeed a bit vague³, while some, especially Western Marxists, have tried to save the work by emphasizing the role played by the world of labor in the socialist education of the heroine Rita Seidel.⁴ This paper attempts to give at least a partial answer to the question of the novel's ideology by concentrating on this socialist education, specifically on the educators or mentors who are responsible for it.

The process of Rita's education is not simple or linear in nature. Essentially, it takes place in two stages which correspond to the two levels of narration of the novel. At the beginning of the work the protagonist awakes to find herself in a hospital after having survived a near fatal accident in the railroad car factory in which she had been working. During the next two months of convalescence she reflects on the past two years of her life. In the structure of the novel this reflection sets the framework for the main action which runs as follows. In 1960 Rita comes to the city of Halle to join her fiance Manfred and to study to become a teacher. During her vacations she works in the aforementioned factory. Both the teachers' institute and the factory contribute to her socialist education. In spite of problems and setbacks encountered in both places, she succeeds in gaining a new socialist consciousness. Her fiance Manfred experiences setbacks of his own, but, unlike Rita, he becomes increasingly disillusioned and finally flees to West Berlin. Rita follows him there, realizes she cannot live in the West, and returns to the GDR. Shortly after her return the Wall is built. She now realizes the finality of her decision and suffers a mental breakdown bringing about the accident in the factory. During the two months of reflection she slowly manages to come to terms with and to reaffirm her decision to stay in the GDR.

Rita's growth and development of consciousness are due in large part to the strong influence exerted on her by three mentors: the brigade worker Rolf Meternagel, the new plant manager Ernst Wendland, and the teacher-recruiter Erwin Schwarzenbach. Two fundamental questions arise about their role. First, what is the nature of their own belief in socialism and how did they gain that belief? Secondly, how and in what form do they impart that conviction to their pupil Rita? To start with the first question, all three became socialists after experiencing fascism first hand. After the war they underwent a similar process of ideological transformation. Meternagel, for example, had been a willing cog in the Nazi war machine until he was caught by the Russians. His description of what followed is illuminating:

"Dann habe ich drei Jahre lang Bäume gefällt und Baracken gebaut, sehr weit im Osten. Kannst mir glauben, daB es lange gedauert hat, ehe ich einsah, daB diese Arbeit der Tischlerei näher lag als über Kimme und Korn auf lebende Ziele zu schießen." Aber sie müsse doch zugeben, daB es nicht allzuviel war, wenn er nur das verstand, und daB es eigentlich nicht ausreichte, um ins Parteihaus zu gehen und sich anzumelden, wie er es gleich nach seiner Rückkehr tat, sechsendreißig Jahre alt. (57)

Apparently life as a German POW in Siberia has had a purgative, educative effect on him culminating in a rather mysterious conversion experience. He has been purged of inhumane fascist beliefs and educated to the realization that constructing things is better than killing. His next step of joining the Party is unexplainable even to himself. To Rita and the reader it is only explainable in terms of the implicit equation whereby humanity (*Menschlichkeit*) = socialism = the Party. Ernst Wendland's experience is strikingly similar. Barely out of his adolescence he was caught in possession of a pistol by Soviet troops and arrested:

Drei Jahre war ich dann in Sibirien, im Bergbau. Unlogisch, was? Sie werden mir glauben: Das hab ich auch gedacht. In die Kalkwand neben meinem Bett hab ich mit einem Nagel eingeritzt: *Bin ich darum davongekommen?* Ich weiß natürlich nicht, was ich hier gemacht hätte. Dort jedenfalls schickten sie mich am Ende der drei Jahre auf Antifa-Schule. Als ich zurückkam, war mein erster Weg zur FDJ. (105)

The intermediate step here, missing in Metefnagel's experience, of attending "Antifa-Schule" matters little; nothing is said in any case about what was actually taught there. Instead, the overwhelming emphasis in each story is on personal experience. Each has gone through "purgatory" to be chastened and ultimately to come out a true believer and defender of the faith, and this a faith which remains quite mysterious. Erwin Schwarzenbach's ideological conversion is less dramatic, but it is just as much a matter of personal experience. He had been a budding young Nazi at the end of the war: "'Damals', sagte er, 'hatten wir HaB und Verachtung verdient und erwartet. Die Partei war nachsichtig und geduldig mit uns, wenn auch anspruchsvoll.'" (130) He was, in other words, overwhelmed by the forgiveness of the Party which was ready to give him a second chance in life.

There remains the second question pertaining to the problem of ideology which must be answered: how and in what form do the educators transmit their conviction to Rita? First and foremost they do this through their whole appearance and force of personality. They are at heart optimists who are constantly struggling with sceptics like Manfred or with people whose vision of society is still limited by bourgeois narrowmindedness (such as Manfred's chemistry professors and many of the workers at the plant). Their humanity and humaneness are revealed not only in their dedication and sense of struggle but also in their fallibility. Meternagel has been twice demoted from responsible positions so that now he is "only" another worker. Schwarzenbach, out of dedication to his work, neglects his son's health and almost loses him. Wendland gets in trouble with the authorities for alleged *Werkegoismus* (i.e. trying to overcome bureaucratic mismanagement by taking matters into his own hands). As teachers they are masters of psychological insight. Meternagel spurs his co-workers on to greater productivity by playing on their egos. Schwarzenbach is able to make even the newspaper ("sogar die Zeitung", 20) interesting when he reads aloud from it (quite a feat if one is familiar with the press of the GDR). The force of these mentors' personalities is such that these men take on heroic dimensions in Rita's eyes. She views Meternagel as one of "die bewunderten Helden alter Bücher" (73). When Wendland, newly appointed to be plant manager, takes the microphone to give a speech she asks herself: "Ist er größer geworden, seit ich ihn in der Kneipe gesehen habe?" (79) Even bourgeois figures are affected by his presence, albeit in a negative way. The elder Herrfurth, for example, can only find him "unheimlich" (55).

Of all the techniques by which the educators impart their knowledge to Rita, one stands out as being especially characteristic in its irrationality: communication with the eyes. As was just mentioned, Rita sees Wendland become bigger after first appearing to her to be "zu unscheinbar" (50). In Meternagel's case his overall appearance remains unimpressive, but the sheer power of his personality seems to radiate from his eyes which Rita describes as "eisblau, intensiv strahlend" (70). His eyes help her overcome doubt and despair: "Manchmal in Stunden des Zweifels und der Verzweiflung waren diese Augen das einzig Wirkliche, daran (sic!) sie sich halten konnte." (72) In addition, her mentors, who of course already possess a higher consciousness, not only radiate truth through their eyes; they also have an uncanny ability to grasp reality by seeing. Wendland, for example, is "hellsichtig bis zur Überempfindlichkeit" (101).⁵

To return to the question originally posed about Rita's educators and the ideology they represent for her, her socialist conviction is based, she says, on "die Gewissheit, daß Meternagels und Wendlands und Schwarzenbachs Lebensgrundsätze einmal das Leben aller Menschen bestimmen würden" (123). Significantly, these "Lebensgrundsätze" are never defined in terms of Marxism-Leninism—even the term socialism is not mentioned very often—but rather in terms of the personalities who represent them. Each of the three are optimistic and idealistic. Meternagel and Wendland reveal a heroic dimension but at the same time seem to exude humanity in the sense of both humaneness and humaneness. All have gained their faith in socialism as the result of personal experience. They have an almost numinous quality which enables them to see truth,

instinctively comprehend, and then impart their knowledge to Rita and others. In addition, the positive force of their personality is enhanced by the presence of such characters as Manfred's unreconstructed bourgeois parents and the dogmatic Stalinist Mangold who act as negative foils for them. In contrast to Rita's mentors, these negative figures show inhumanity, pettiness, and narrow-mindedness. It is significant that Rita cannot, for instance, visualize Mangold's face when she tries to.

In summary, what Rita Seidel's educators teach her is merely a utopian, irrational, idealistic humanism. This humanism is tautological. It defines itself in terms of itself. It is apparently genuine and deeply felt. But in its idealistic irrationalism it seems artificially superimposed by Christa Wolf on the people and society of the GDR. It thus tends to contradict the Marxist dictum according to which social being determines consciousness, since what one has here is consciousness determining consciousness. (More on this below.) Furthermore, its basic irrationalism has a highly questionable component which also deserves some elaboration.

This component or reverse side of Christa Wolf's humanism is benevolent authoritarianism. In her highly moralistic universe there is a constant danger that evil (the inhumane, the latently fascistic) will overcome good (the humane). Rita realizes this danger when, in a moment of despair, she conceives of a world without Schwarzenbachs, Meternagels and Wendlands: "Denn ohne sie", she says, "würden die Herrfurths die Welt überspülen." (123) Thus, when she actually does travel to the land of the Herrfurths, i.e. West Berlin, it is with fear, trepidation, and an extremely guilty conscience. She is "vom schlechten Gewissen gezeichnet" (168). She tells herself the trip is "ein Wagnis, und du hättest sie nicht allein unternehmen sollen." (169) She has clearly learned her lesson well; there is really no doubt that she will return to the GDR.

But what about those who have not been educated to her level of consciousness? After all, the Herrfurths of the world "haben auch Kinder, man kann es ihnen nicht verbieten." (182) In her answer to this question Rita demonstrates that she has now become the educator: "Ich werde die Kinder vor diesen Vätern schützen." (192) In other words, in order to educate "die Kinder", i.e. those of naive consciousness, one must proscribe their activity and protect them from evil. From here it is but a short step to that ultimate means of protection from the land of the Herrfurths, the Wall. In a letter lamenting Manfred's flight to the West (a crime in the GDR), Manfred's friend Martin expresses it this way: "Wenn er hier geblieben wäre, und sei es durch Zwang: Heute müßte er versuchen, mit allem fertig zu werden. Heute könnte er ja nicht mehr ausweichen." (Wolf's emphasis) (134)

In order to understand the ideological implications of Wolf's authoritarian humanism, one must examine her work within its theoretical and historical context. As mentioned earlier, Marx stated that social being (*gesellschaftliches Sein*) determines consciousness (*Bewußtsein*) and not the other way around as the German Idealists had maintained.⁶ By social being he meant the structure of social relations as determined by the economic base (*Basis*), specifically the mode of production. Consciousness meant not only individual conscious-

ness but also the total self-interpretation or superstructure (*Überbau*) of a society in the form of law, government, philosophy, art etc. When the workers revolted and seized the means of production, this radical change in social being would more or less automatically bring about a concomitant change in consciousness. On the microcosmic level Marx viewed the above process in terms of the worker's relationship to labor. Alienation resulted from the exploitive labor performed by the worker for the capitalist owner of the means of production. Alienation would be overcome and labor would become productive and creative when the workers took over the means of production.

Unfortunately, in the GDR things did not happen this way. The revolution was imposed from above on a reluctant society steeped in bourgeois as well as fascist thinking, one component of which was vehement anticommunism. The leaders of the East German Communist Party (SED) were thus faced with the task of changing both social being and consciousness at the same time. By the early Sixties, when Christa Wolf began writing, they had in fact succeeded in establishing the socialist mode of production, only to discover that Marx' dictum was being confounded again. Not only had their un-Marxian attempt at direct socialist re-education been largely unsuccessful, the new socialist base was also not eliciting the predicted higher consciousness, especially among the workers. The most striking admission of this fundamental contradiction lay in the building of the Wall.

If this double contradiction found material expression in the Wall, it found artistic expression in the literature of the same period (the early Sixties), one of the best examples of which is Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel*. Superficially, the work does deal with the economic base as represented by the railroad car factory and its workers. But the problems found there find simplistic explanations. The factory is made a victim of the Cold War machinations of the West. (The novel's prologue immediately evokes the atmosphere of the Cold War for which the West is clearly seen to be responsible.) The West boycotts metals needed for production. It induces the plant manager to abandon his responsibilities and flee. (Even Manfred's flight to the West, the factor upon which the whole action of the novel depends, is traced to the West's subversive influence on the official who rejects Manfred's invention out of hand.) To be sure, the GDR bureaucracy also comes in for criticism but in such a cautious way as to exonerate it at the same time. Meternagel's double demotion and Wendland's severe reprimand by the authorities are seen dialectically as unfortunate but inevitable. Once again Wolf's approval of the authoritarian structure of the system is evident.⁷

In the final analysis, however, the factory's problems are attributed to the workers' attitudes which still reveal latent fascism or at the very least, uncooperative selfishness. The workers do not seem to realize their new position in society as owners of the means of production; they do not seem to appreciate that their labor is now creative and meaningful; in other words, they lack the right consciousness. Ultimately, their consciousness is changed, just as Rita's is, by another exemplary consciousness as exhibited by the idealistic models Meternagel and Wendland. In saying this, Wolf has in effect conceded the fundamental ideological contradiction outlined above and finds herself in the same

desperate situation as do the Party ideologues. Like them she is a part of the superstructure or collective consciousness (and conscience) of East German society. As a product of the superstructure her novel is an exhortation from above to follow the socio-economic laws of the base as predicted by Marx. To do this is, of course, a contradiction in itself. If one accepts for a moment the claim that Marxism-Leninism is a science, then one is reminded of psychologist B. F. Skinner and his proverbial pigeons which would not obey their contingencies of reinforcement. He reportedly said to them, "Behave, damn it!" In *Der geteilte Himmel* Wolf is saying to the citizens of the GDR, "Be humane, creative, industrious, damn it! You're living under socialism!"⁸

Ohio State University

NOTES

- ¹ For a thorough discussion of the novel by East German critics see Martin Reso, "*Der Geteilte Himmel*" und seine Kritiker: *Dokumentation mit einem Nachwort des Herausgebers* (Halle/Saale: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1965). The opinion here is taken from the article by D. Allert and H. Wetzelt, "Die große Liebe", pp. 78-85.
- ² Dieter Schlenstedt, "Motive und Symbole in Christa Wolf's Erzählung *Der geteilte Himmel*," *Weimarer Beiträge*, 1 (1964), 77.
- ³ Marion von Salisch, *Zwischen Selbstaufgabe und Selbstverwirklichung: Zum Problem der Persönlichkeitsstruktur im Werk Christa Wolf* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1975), p. 29.
- ⁴ David Bathrick, "Literature of the Industrial World: Christa Wolf's *The Divided Heaven*" (Unpublished paper given at the 16th meeting of the Midwest Modern Language Association in St. Louis, November 1974).
- ⁵ It should be emphasized that the above are not isolated examples. The idea of learning by seeing is fundamental to the novel's message. Rita is described as a "Zuschauer" sitting "vor einer Bühne mit wechselnder Beleuchtung und Szenerie, sie sah die Spieler agieren, und der Gedanke verfolgte sie, daß all diese Bruchstücke am Ende ein Schauspiel ergeben mußten, hinter dessen Sinn sie alleine kommen sollte." (33) The process of enlightenment is meant almost literally as Rita learns to see reality more clearly: "Man blickt sich um. Sieh mal an, es lebt sich. Im Stillen hat sich manches geklärt... Sie sieht sich und fühlt sich und ist nicht mehr dieses hingeschleuderte Ding am Boden eines Schachts." (99)
- ⁶ Karl Marx, "Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859)," in Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, ed. and trans., *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1973).
- ⁷ Eleven years later in 1974 Wolf demonstrated her continued belief in benevolent authoritarianism in remarks made after a lecture which she gave at Oberlin College in Ohio. Asked about GDR writers who might have protested the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, she answered that, as far as she knew, there were none. Her implication clearly seemed to be: the writers of the GDR felt the invasion to be justified in order to save

- ⁸ It should be pointed out that the exact interrelationship between social being and consciousness (as well as base and superstructure) is a much debated topic among Marxist theorists, especially in the west. In Eastern Europe and the GDR, however, the problem is more than theoretical, it is a matter of self-legitimatization. There it is realized that the further one goes in relativizing Marx' fundamental principle to emphasize the role of consciousness, the further one moves away from the official state philosophy of dialectical materialism which justifies the status quo with its claim of scientific and historical inevitability. As a result it is almost impossible for them honestly to come to grips with this contradiction. Instead, the contradiction is made to disappear by an artful piece of Hegelian legerdemain which turns Marx' principle on its head. Since the socialist mode of production exists, it is argued, (what is, is real) and since the Party, the government, art, in sum the collective consciousness or superstructure of the socialist society also exist, then that consciousness *must* be the true or real consciousness of the society—quod erat demonstrandum. Thus, any serious deviation from such official consciousness, no matter whether it is expressed by an ordinary worker or a dissident writer such as Wolf Biermann, can readily be dismissed as an "unreal" aberration.